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DISILLUSION



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DISILLUSION

A Story with a Preface

BY

DOROTHY LEIGHTON

AUTHOR OF 'AS A MAN IS ABLE'

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOLUME I

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TO MY CRITICS

‘Two scholars going together from Pennafiel to Salamanca, and finding themselves weary and faint, stopped by the side of a fountain which they came to in their way. As they were resting themselves there, they by chance espied a stone with some words written upon it, almost effaced by time, and the feet of the flocks that came to drink at that spring : they washed the dirt off the stone ; and when they could read the words distinctly, they found this inscription in the Castilian tongue—

“Agni est à encerrada el alma del Licenciado Pedro Garcias.” (“The soul of the Licentiate Pedro Garcias is here enclosed.”)

‘The youngest of the scholars, a brisk, blunt boy, had no sooner read the inscription than he laughed, and cried, “The soul here enclosed! I would fain know the author of such a foolish epitaph.”

‘So saying, he got up and went away; while his companion, who had more judgment, said to himself, “There must be some mystery in it; I will stay and see whether I can find it out.” Accordingly, he let the other scholar go before him; and when he was gone he pulled out his knife and dug up the earth about the stone, which at last he removed, and found under it a leather purse which he opened. There were a hundred ducats in it, with a card, whereon was written in Latin to this effect: “Be thou my heir, thou who hast wit enough to find out the meaning of this epitaph, and make a better use of my money than I did.”

‘ The scholar was overjoyed at the discovery, covered the place with the stone again, and proceeded to Salamanca with the “soul” of the Licentiate in his pocket.’

Gil Blas.

‘ A nobler order yet shall be
Than any that the world hath known,
When men obey, and yet are free,
Are loved, and yet can stand alone.’

W. M. W. CALL.

CHAPTER I

‘ I will effuse egotism, and show it underlying all—and I will be the bard of Personality.

And I will show of male and female that either is but the equal of the other.’

WALT WHITMAN.

YES, the play was a success, a distinct success. All the critics were agreed for once, except a little bilious person who revelled in melodrama and disliked realism. The applause was genuine and prolonged, and there were loud cries of ‘Author!’ ‘Author!’

The author stepped forward, and in a modest and brief speech thanked the audience for their kind reception of his work. His manner was prepossessing, and in it even the bilious person could find nothing to carp at. Mark Sergison was the hero of the hour, and he felt the hour to

be a proud one. Rather below the average height, dark, with deep-set grey eyes that lighted up his face and made it almost handsome, a slight stoop and a square strong figure—such was he.

And as he stood in front of the lights, bowing his acknowledgments of the applause, his glance involuntarily strayed to an upper box, where a pair of earnest, grave brown eyes were watching him.

His lips, unconcealed by moustache or beard, smiled back a frank admission that he was satisfied. Ten minutes later he was outside the theatre and looking round eagerly for the owner of the brown eyes.

‘Ah, there you are, Linda!—so afraid you’d escape home alone. Come along, I am as hungry as a lion. It was a good night, eh?—what’s your verdict?’ he said, catching hold of a cloak with which the girl was tussling, and helping her into it.

‘Splendid—oh, quite splendid, Mark!’ she replied enthusiastically—‘better than I ever dared hope it would be. Grace Owen was simply superb!’

‘Yes, and Dale too, eh?—didn’t you think so? But, I say, Linda, when they called for “author,” I wanted desperately to drag you along too—it’s yours, you know, every bit as much as mine.’

‘Nonsense, Mark, I only——’

‘Yes, you *only* made it just what it is, a success;—don’t let’s argue—I m too hungry. What shall we have? Is it against our creed too utterly to have oysters, and just a small bottle of fizz? Oh, don’t, Linda!—you make me feel so small. I wish you’d yield to the luxury of one human desire—just to-night, to keep me company.’

They entered a small restaurant which was not much frequented at that late hour, but where they were evidently well known,

for the gaping, sleepy waiter pulled himself together with a visible effort, and smiled as wide as he could without making himself yawn again.

The girl sat down in an absent, pre-occupied way, and began drawing off her gloves slowly, and without any show of impatience for her supper. Presently she took off her hat—naturally, as if she were a man—and threw it down on a chair beside her. Her hair was short and curled close to her head, and she ran her fingers through it in a way, which always suggested the idea that she only needed a moustache to complete her as a very handsome boy. For handsome she certainly was, though not, perhaps, attractive to most beauty-lovers. Her face was, indeed, not of the feminine type at all; it was frank and open as a boy's, and the eyes were fearlessly wide, but the nose was rather thick

and short, and the lips had a set look about them which betokened a habit of reserve and repression, even of severity, which made women say Linda Grey was hard, and men afraid to show to her their weak side.

To-night, however, the lines had relaxed around her mouth, and she looked more of a woman and less of a boy than Mark had ever seen her; and he wished she would oftener look thus. Life was so stern in reality, one wanted a little 'badinage' to relieve its monotony of work.

'Now, Linda,' he said, holding the sparkling wine up to her and smiling, 'have some—do!'

She shook her head.

'No, really not, Mark—I don't like it, and it doesn't like me. I'll just have some coffee.'

'Then I must drink to the long life of "*The Heir-Presumptive*" all alone. Here

goes—and may his run be long and prosperous !’

‘Amen—Amen.’

So they talked and laughed happily over the event of the day, until the clock hands warned them that midnight was near, and the little waiter’s yawns could be stifled no longer, but became audible signals for them to depart home.

‘Now, we are not going to finish this most memorable evening by patronising any such commonplace vehicle as a ’bus,’ said Mark, as he stepped into the street by the girl’s side : ‘there is an indiarubber-tyred chap—get in, Linda,’ and before she could remonstrate or expostulate she found herself shut into a spring-seated, ivory-fitted hansom behind a sturdy little roan that trotted along gaily as if it were proud and pleased to carry home the illustrious author of a remarkably clever play.

‘This is really dreadful!’ said Linda after a moment’s pause, during which she was rapidly surveying the situation. ‘Champagne, and then a hansom! oh, Mark—you aren’t going to let success turn your head from your—our—principles, are you?’

She spoke quite earnestly, but he laughed.

‘No fear!—my principles are sound enough; only, one’s success doesn’t come very often, you know, and needs commemorating when it does. Like falling in love, the first time is always the best and most exhilarating; at least so they say—can’t speak from experience myself.’

‘Oh, no,’ said Linda eagerly; ‘I don’t think you’ve chosen an apt simile at all—falling in love is surely only a selfish emotion, but a success like yours——’

‘Ours,’ corrected he.

She gave him a quick look of pleasure, and went on—

‘Success like *this* of your play’s gives hundreds of people pleasure. Oh, don’t compare to-night’s delight and satisfaction to anything so commonplace as falling in love!’

He laughed, but answered gravely—

‘You and I oughtn’t to mock at what we know nothing about, Linda. I often think we should——’

‘Don’t!’ she cried, putting up her hand quickly, as if to stop him from speaking; ‘don’t say you think it is an experience we ought both to have had.’

‘That’s just what I was going to say. I do think it.’

‘It’s not worthy of you, Mark.’

‘Not worthy? Why?’

‘Love is such a miserable, selfish thing; it absorbs people and destroys work. Oh, look at all the men and women you know, and see if those who work best and hardest

are not those who are above such weak nonsense; and look at those who are devoured by passion, how wretched they are, how useless, how incapable of any grand effort. Remember the Baxters—he never able to come to the meetings now because she is delicate, and she swamping all his energies and his money for her miserable health and her baby's needs. Oh, Mark, Mark, don't say that success is like love; it is ever so much nobler and grander, and more satisfactory in the long-run.'

'Perhaps,' he said doubtfully. 'And yet—yes, Linda, I must say it, though you'll despise me for it—I do think the Baxters are greater than we are, somehow, with all our devotion to the Cause, and all our powers of work. I think they are more human, after all.'

'Oh, why should mere marriage make people more human?—more selfish, I say, if that is specially human.'

‘Not mere marriage, Linda, but love is humanity’s best endeavour; it is only in his love that man can show his superiority over the animals.’

‘But that is just where he fails. Animals are even less bestial in their loves than men; they at least obey their natural instincts, while men exceed them. Oh, don’t say love is man’s best endeavour—it is his lowest fall. Work, splendid, devoted, hard work, is man’s best gift, voluntarily chosen and performed gladly and joyfully. That is what distinguishes him from the beast below him—work for the Race, not for a single individual or group of individuals, brought into the world, perhaps, through selfish weakness. Work, Mark, is our creed. You know it is, for you live it every day of your life.’

‘Yes, yes, I know!’ he said rather petulantly; ‘but still——’

The cab stopped, bringing their discussion to a close. Linda sprang out and felt for her latch-key, and Mark followed her up the steep stone stairs that led to their respective dwellings; for they both lived in the same block of houses, built originally, for artisans of a better class, though chiefly tenanted to-day by professional people, glad to avail themselves of the low rents and convenient arrangements for small incomes.

They paused on the landing outside Linda's door, and Mark held out his hand—an unwonted circumstance in their intercourse.

‘Thanks, dear little comrade!’ he said in a quiet voice, bending his grey eyes upon hers, and holding her hand.

She made no answer in words, but for a second she allowed the grasp of her fingers round his to tighten ever so little, and a faint

colour mounted to her cheeks. Then with her disengaged hand she turned the key in the door, and entered in silence.

Her intense reserve kept her from exhibiting any of the pleasure she felt at having had a share in the success of the evening ; but as soon as the door closed behind her she gave vent to her feelings by covering her face with her hands and ejaculating almost audibly, ‘ Oh, if only he is not spoilt by it ! ’

They had made friends, these two, out of their juxtaposition. A year ago Mark Sergison had come to live in Anstey Buildings, and had chosen the topmost floor as being the more airy and less noisy. Linda Grey occupied the flat immediately below, and he had often noticed her coming in and out of the building, and her strong boy’s face and fearless gaze had set him wondering who she might be. She, also, had felt

some natural curiosity about him, for living within the same outer door engenders an interest that is scarcely felt by other than fellow-tenants. Linda had come home one afternoon earlier than usual, to find a small can of cream outside her own front door. So unwonted a luxury she knew was not for her; and while she was still hesitating how to dispose of it, Sergison came quickly down from his rooms on the floor above hers, and exclaimed apologetically—

‘I beg your pardon, but I think that must be my cream at your door. I am expecting friends to tea, and the milkman is apt to be vague with his deliveries.’

She handed the can to him with a smile, and passed in to her flat.

Scarcely had she settled herself to boil her own tea-kettle, when a knock came to her door, and on opening it she was eagerly accosted by Sergison.

‘ I have come now to beg of your charitable loan of a cream-jug,’ he said half-shyly, but with a pleasant smile.

‘ By all means,’ she replied readily ; and going to a cupboard she produced a tiny old silver cream-jug, holding it out to him with a frank look of pleasure that reassured him.

‘ You are very welcome to use this,’ she said ; ‘ only, as it happens to be really old, I value it considerably.’

He thanked her profusely, and returned to his friends. Later in the evening the cream-jug was restored by Sergison in person, and Linda, liking his looks, and feeling rather in want of a chat with some one, asked him to come in and admire the remainder of the service to which the jug belonged.

While she was searching for it he stepped into her tiny sitting-room, the duplicate of his own, curious to see her taste in the

matter of decoration and arrangement. He was at once struck by the characteristic absence of all feminine fripperies and the almost Spartan bareness of the room.

A table—large for its accommodation—stood in the window, which, like his own, gave over the river, but which, from its uncurtained condition, looked like a person minus collar. A bookshelf occupied one corner near the fireplace, and on either side of the hearth was a wicker chair. A small table stood beside one of them, on which were strewn several books. The only attempt at decorative art was an autotype of Watts' allegorical subject, 'Hope,' which hung over the mantelshelf, and on the opposite wall a framed illumination of the lines :

'Strive, and hold cheap the strain;
Learn, nor account the pang ; dare, never grudge the
throe !'

'A strong woman, this !' he thought, as he

completed the quotation in his mind, recalling the line,

‘ Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail ? ’

and with eager interest he picked up one of the books from the small table, feeling sure it would coincide with the Watts and the Browning touches.

It was Carpenter’s *Towards Democracy*, and he fairly started at the discovery, for it chanced to be a book which had recently impressed him to no slight degree, and the marginal scorings indicated a further identity in their respective tastes.

The next he took up was Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*—a natural companion to the other work, he thought, but an uncommon book to find on a woman’s table.

He was turning over its pages when Linda entered ; and, setting the silver things

down, she came hurriedly towards him and said in an offhand manner—

‘Oh, don’t be surprised at my choice of literature—it is both heterogeneous and heterodox.’

‘Heterodoxy is my “doxy,” and so far I have only discovered what is homogeneous,’ he answered genially, adding—‘You and I think, apparently, on the same lines; those are both favourite authors with me’—indicating Whitman and Carpenter.

‘I don’t know whether I do like either of them yet,’ she replied in the same brusque manner, as if any approach towards intimacy were distasteful to her. ‘I am studying them; we have debates at a club to which I belong—the “Spade Club”—you have perhaps heard of it?’

He pleaded ignorance, and begged for further information.

‘It is called the Spade Club,’ she ex-

plained, ‘because of that sentence of Carpenter’s—you probably know it—“A spade will serve.”’

‘But why “spade”? Are you pledged to frankness of speech, or do you profess to dig foundations for others to build?’ he asked.

‘Precisely—those are the very reasons for our name. We are pledged to frankness of speech and freedom of thought, and no one is allowed to join who is not ready to dig in one direction or another.’

‘You are Revolutionists, then?’

‘Yes—we are.’

‘All women?’

‘Oh, no! you can become a “Spade” if you like. Our debates are free and open to all; and if you would care to come to one of them, you are welcome to accompany me any Sunday evening. Next week we take this bit of Whitman—give me the book,

and I will show it to you. This is it'
(quoting):

“ Let that which is in front go behind,
Let that which was behind advance to the front,
Let bigots, fools, unclean persons offer new propositions,
Let the old propositions be postponed,
Let a man seek pleasure everywhere but in himself,
Let a woman seek pleasure everywhere but in herself.”

Now, that is one of the few passages of Whitman's that I can follow and understand. When he raves over material joys, I confess I do not.'

'He is rather an extremist—certainly there are few Englishwomen who could be found daring and free enough to accept his views of natural human life. I should very much like to accept your invitation and be initiated into the mysteries of the "Spades." I am rather inclined to be a revolutionist myself—only my more philosophical side keeps me in check.'

‘We are not political so much as social “spades,”’ said Linda ; ‘we are pledged to no political creed—our chief concern is the simplification of social life. We wage war against luxury—superfluity of any kind, in fact—and we dig away at the foundations of existing social structures, believing them to be rotten and doomed to ruin.’

They conversed for some time on topics of mutual interest, until Sergison feared he had already trespassed further on this woman’s time than their acquaintance warranted ; but on taking his leave he felt distinctly conscious of having struck a new vein of thought which was destined to influence his whole future.

Linda’s profession was type-writing, which she carried on in a merchant’s office in the City.

Her hours were regular and not over-long, and her evenings were entirely her own.

She and Mark became fast friends as soon

as they discovered their mutual sympathies, and before long he began to listen for her light, quick step on the stairs, and to wait for the sound of her latch-key as it turned in her door, after which he knew he might venture down to her rooms and claim her help and sympathy in his work. It was now a year since they made acquaintance, and the success of the play, at which they had worked together so diligently, was an accomplished fact. Certainly, if newspaper criticism could turn a man's head with praise, Mark Sergison ran a fair chance of this occurring to him; for the morning after the production of the play brought with it a shower of laudatory notices in the daily papers, and the *Heir-Presumptive* was pronounced on all sides to be an unqualified success. It was 'clever,' it was 'interesting,' it was 'smart.' The author was 'to be congratulated on his first attempt and encour-

aged to repeat the effort.' It was very gratifying to read the flattering criticisms; and if Linda Grey would but have allowed her own share in it to be known, Mark's cup of satisfaction would have been full.

But in this she was obdurate.

Her shy, reserved nature shrank from any approach to notoriety, and she dreaded fame for herself no less than for Mark.

He took all the criticisms to show to her, but she merely glanced at them, saying carelessly, 'Their praise is nothing;' and then, with sudden recollection of a passage in Carpenter's book, she turned to it and gave it to Mark to read :

'If you are successful in all you do, you cannot also battle magnificently against odds.'

'The odds are past,' he replied, in a tone from which he could not keep all trace of disappointment.

'That is a dangerous notion to get into

your head,' she said quickly. 'Success is often the precursor of failure.'

A few evenings later in the week, when Mark came in from an unusually brilliant supper-party at which a Royal duke had been a guest, he found a note in his letter-box with the following in Linda's handwriting :

'Greatness stands upon a precipice, and if prosperity carries a man never so little beyond his poise, it overbears and dashes him to pieces. It is a rare thing for a man in great prosperity to lay down his happiness gladly, it being a common fate for a man to sink under the weight of those felicities that raise him.'

He frowned a little as he laid down the paper. 'She has no faith in me!' he thought ; 'there is no fear of my losing my poise. Seneca was a wise old beggar, but he never wrote a play in nineteenth-century London, or he would not have been so sententious. You mean well, little friend, I know ; but

Dale is right, and all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, which dull boy I was rapidly becoming. "Spades" are all very well in their way, but—heigho!—to-night I feel somehow as if "hearts" were going to be trumps.'

Early next morning, while Linda (who could not on her slender income afford a servant) was doing her own housework, Mark tapped at her door, and in an apologetic voice asked to be admitted.

'If you won't mind my dusting the chair that you will be sitting on,' she said in a semi-discouraging manner, as she shook her duster outside the door when he had entered.

'We don't seem to have met for ages,' he said.

'Not since the day before yesterday,' she replied, flicking her duster over the table with scant ceremony to her visitor.

‘I have so much to tell you, Linda,’ he began, undaunted by her offhand manner, and seating himself on a chair farthest from her operations.

‘Yes?—I am listening. I have read that notice in the *Pall Mall Budget*. How do you like the comparison to Ibsen?’

‘Very much ; do you?’

She curled her lip.

‘Oh, yes, it is well enough. Now that Ibsen is the fashion, it is a very good thing for you to be bracketed with him, I suppose.’

‘Linda! don’t be scornful—I cannot tell you how much it vexes me that you will hold yourself aloof in this way from sharing my enjoyment of the play’s success. I wish you would come again to the theatre and join one of Dale’s supper-parties.’

‘You know I hate late hours and incongruous meetings,’ she answered briefly ; adding the next minute, with a sigh, ‘I have

heard you come in every night—or rather morning, for it is always nearly two o'clock before you come home.'

'I am sorry to have disturbed you so late, but I have really had the gayest imaginable time. Royalty patronised me last night—don't look contemptuous—It was most appreciative, I assure you. And, Linda, I was introduced to the old Duchess of Canterbury, and found her most enlightened too! Yes—you may look incredulous, but it is a fact; and in her box I met and talked to a perfectly delightful girl—a Miss Adair. I fancy she is half a foreigner. She knows several languages, Russian included, and has travelled all over Europe. Our attraction was apparently mutual, for she invited me to dine on Sunday to meet her father.'

'Not next Sunday!' exclaimed Linda, turning round and fixing her eyes, wide open in alarm, upon Mark.

‘ Yes—next Sunday,’ he said, rather taken aback by her tone and look. ‘ Why not ? ’

‘ Sunday ! Mark, next Sunday we are to have our debate on the “ Ethics of Pain.” You promised to open the discussion.’

Mark fidgeted uneasily in his chair.

‘ I forgot that ! ’ he began falteringly ; then more courageously : ‘ I am really sorry, but it is essential that I should avail myself of the opportunities that my play affords me of enlarging my circle of acquaintances. It is not that I am the less interested in the subjects we discuss at the “ Spade,” Linda, but I feel I want width of experience, and for this reason I have accepted the Adairs’ invitation next Sunday. Don’t regard me as a defaulter, but as a skirmisher ; I am reconnoitring, that is all.’

Linda whisked her duster over the tables and chairs with increased vigour, but said nothing.

Presently she went into her kitchen, and Mark heard her stir the fire and draw water from the tap with a curious consciousness that annoyance with him was being plainly exhibited in the brusque rapidity of all her movements. He remained where he was, waiting for her to return, which she did in a few moments, bearing a jug of water in her arms, and setting it down heavily on the table nearest the window.

‘Can’t I help you?’ he asked in a tone that was meant to be conciliatory.

‘No, thanks,’ she replied shortly; and then added inconsequently, ‘You may get shot.’

He did not understand her meaning at first, and then it dawned upon him that her mind was still upon the coming Sunday dinner-engagement, and that she referred to his own phrase.

‘It will be a soldier’s death, then,’ he answered, laughing, and added more

seriously: 'Little comrade, have faith in me—I must think of what is expedient, and we have often discussed the necessity of combining the wisdom of the serpent with the enthusiasm of the pioneer. Don't be the only thorn in my rose-garden, Linda! Fate is shining very brightly on me just now—come and bask in the sunshine too, for a little.'

'A rose-garden is no place for a man like you,' she exclaimed fiercely—'the thorns are there to make you remember that!'

He shrugged his shoulders and rose from his seat, and, going towards the door, he said in a different tone—

'What I really came to ask you was whether you would come up this evening and go through the first act of that Russian play once more. Have you had time to look at it since the other day?'

'No,' said she; 'I have been too busy.'

‘ But will you come this evening ? ’

‘ I am too busy,’ she repeated curtly.

For an instant he looked annoyed, and then, tossing back his head with a characteristic gesture as if in defiance of her displeasure, he went out ; and the next minute Linda heard his door shut sharply above her, with a sense of loss for which she could not easily account.

CHAPTER II

‘The philosophy we learn from books makes but a faint impression on the mind in comparison with that which we are taught by our own experience.’—MARIA EDGEWORTH.

LINDA GREY was one of the original members of the ‘Spade Club.’

She, with a few other women, had determined to organise a woman’s club on their own lines. They started with a small number of eighteen women who enrolled themselves as members on the understanding that they were willing and ready to promote the advancement of humanity: not by platform-speaking, divided skirts, or clamour for the franchise, but by steadfast determination to strive to live up to their ideal of true womanhood.

They believed that the Woman Question

was but a step on the ladder of Universal Progress; that all measures which aimed exclusively at the emancipation of woman were inadequate, in that they ignored the man's need for emancipation from his ideas about woman. They admitted the crying need for reform in the laws relating specially to women, but knew that the first stone in the erection of a perfected human structure must be laid by man.

Therefore, although the 'Spade' was a woman's club, they allowed men to attend the weekly discussions and even to become honorary members. Some of the leading foreign Socialists had honoured the little gatherings with their presence, and the debates had grown more and more daring in subject, and freer and bolder in expression.

They had begun in an unpretentious way with the two upper floors of a house in

Oxford Street, towards the furnishing of which each member had contributed what she could.

The decision of a name which should not be aggressive in its claims, yet that should at the same time express the object of the club, and definitely distinguish it from other clubs, had been a matter of much discussion. It was at the first general meeting that the original starter, a Mrs. Wentworth, had proposed the name of 'The Spade Club.'

A silence had followed the suggestion. The proposer, till she had given reasons for her choice, had not expected approval.

In a straightforward, unhesitating manner, she explained that whilst reading a modern prose-poet her attention had been arrested by the words :

'All tools shall serve—all trades, professions, ranks, and occupations ;
The spade shall serve—it shall unearth a treasure
beyond price.'

The lines were received with unqualified commendation. Mrs. Wentworth then shortly explained that she was anxious for the members to realise that, as members of that club, she wished them to be bold, and fearlessly to proclaim the truth; never to shrink from facing the realities of life; never, from a false sense of shame, to conceal, on any and every subject, their inward convictions. Further, she wished them to know that no topic was to be excluded from their debates, and that every member was to consider herself free to speak her own thoughts in her own way, not to hesitate to call a spade a spade, and to end apparent evils by facing and overcoming them.

At the close of the meeting the name of 'The Spade Club' was put to the vote, and unanimously chosen. How long ago it all seemed to Linda that warm June evening,

as she slowly walked from Hyde Park Corner to Oxford Street! She passed through the swing-door, along the intervening passage, and up the stone stairs.

Being the evening for debate, the front room was fairly well filled as Linda entered. The murmur of conversation sounded pleasant indeed, after the deafening rattle of the omnibus by which she had come from Chelsea. Most of the members Linda knew personally, and all of them by sight. Yet sometimes it interested her to study them as if she were merely an onlooker. It pleased her to think that at the Spade Club youth in itself was no special qualification, and that for a woman to grow old was not necessarily to lose her womanly charm. Not a few of the most popular 'Spades' were far from young, and were looked up to and respected for their wider experience and larger views of life. There, at least,

dress was no insignia of worth ; a member was esteemed for her intrinsic merit, and not according to the cut of her clothes.

She contrasted in her mind the women about her with the pretty, fashionable little women of society—women whose aim was pleasure, to be followed along the path of comfort and expediency. She compared the sprightly, animated chatter of one of these women, the guest of a member, with the serious tones and impressive manner of Mrs. Wentworth as she discussed with the secretary the coming strike of women-workers in the leading toy factories. Yet Linda knew that both represented phases of life, and she tried not to feel bitter when she recollected Mark's defection in favour of the frivolous.

The evening was warm. Linda chose a seat near an open window ; the curtain flapped idly in the draught, and the sound

of distant church-bells and of occasional passing vehicles served as accompaniment to the murmur of conversation around her.

Her thoughts drifted to her everyday life, to Mark and his new interests; till they were suddenly recalled by Mrs. Wentworth's rising to read her paper. Linda looked at her admiringly. She was considered handsome; but it was more than personal beauty that attracted Linda: it was character, written in the lines of the mouth, in the steady, almost brave, look of the eyes, and expressed in the way she stood as she looked deliberately round the room before beginning her paper. Then in a clear, firm voice she read: 'That there is no Progress without Pain.'

'And does the path wind up-hill all the way?

Yes: to the very end.'

The little frivolous woman near Linda raised her eyebrows, toyed with her watch-

bracelet, crossed and uncrossed her diminutive feet, and sighed a studied little sigh ; but as Mrs. Wentworth's words penetrated to Linda's mind she ceased to be annoyed with trifles, and became absorbed in the working out of the proposition. 'No progress without pain !' She listened to every word, enthralled : to the backward glance over history ; the graphic description of a present struggling humanity ; and then the earnest looking forward, the calm acceptance of pain that, through that same suffering, humanity might be raised, purified, sanctified. Tears started to Linda's eyes with a stinging, smarting sensation. No progress without pain ! She would not believe it. It was unjust ; pain was not right. Why should not every one be happy ? It was their natural right. She clasped her hands tightly together round her knee. Mrs. Wentworth was saying that suffering

was happiness, in that it contained the germ of a completer, fuller joy ; that we of to-day ought to be ready—nay, glad—to bear pain as a token of progress. She cited that the worst phase of painful diseases was, when there ceased to be a consciousness of pain. She incidentally referred to the women for whose sake she and others were organising the strike—that it was necessary for them to suffer in order that they might be free. In the same way, she declared, there was no freedom for the soul apart from suffering ; no progress, therefore, without pain.

Having finished her paper, Mrs. Wentworth sat quietly down amidst the applause of her supporters.

The first speaker on the opposition side was a new member. In a straightforward, direct manner she refuted the motion. She denied the statement that there was no progress without pain. Further, she main-

tained that the truest progress was the gradual, silent advance, of which humanity is only conscious when the work is completed. She accused the proposer of having put forward a false ideal as the motive of existence; she held that to install pain in lieu of happiness was to damage the cause of freedom. She asserted that the desire for happiness was implanted in every human creature, and that it was the God-power within that urged man on to his rightful possession. That suffering even improved character she much doubted, instancing that the pleasantest—though perhaps not the strongest—characters were those with whom life had dealt liberally and kindly; whereas, on the other hand, she had found that pain—not physical pain—had the effect of hardening and embittering human nature and deadening the power of sympathy; and that, if hope for humanity lay only through

suffering, she had no hesitation in saying that it was a lost cause.

Another member followed, but had nothing to say beyond fully indorsing every word of the last speaker, and to remark that, if happiness were not to be the aim of progress, she feared retrogression rather than progress would be the probable result.

Linda, at this point, felt suddenly moved to speak. To that day she had never overcome a strange nervousness in addressing the meeting: before she stood up she seemed to have so much, so very much, to say; and directly she began to speak, her ideas had an unpleasant way of leaving her. She was glad that she did not betray any nervousness in her voice; fortunately, nobody knew how her legs trembled, or was conscious, as she was, of the cold, numb sensation in her hands. Yet she felt she must speak. Rising from her

semi-concealment behind the curtain, she began :

‘ I am in accord with the paper in so far that I believe a certain amount of suffering is inevitable, and that, for many, progress must entail some pain. But that suffering is to be welcomed, even courted !—I have no hesitation in saying that I consider it an unheard-of proposition ! I submit that the idea of ultimate happiness could alone make present suffering endurable ; that unhappiness is due to ignorance of life and its requirements, as physical disease is due to functional derangement and ignorance with regard to proper physical readjustment ; and I believe that, as unarrested disease ends in death, so unhappiness, the disease of the soul, must end in death to progress and advance.

‘ I contend that every means for promoting happiness should be employed ; that

self-renunciation is contrary to the law of owing a duty to oneself; and that the suffering in one human life produces suffering in many, and is therefore infinitely more harmful in its results. If Christina Rossetti's words be true, then where is the object of climbing if the summit is never to be reached?'

She sat down as abruptly as she had risen, and a woman with a sorrow-lined face crowned by snow-white hair rose eagerly, and, addressing Linda rather than the chair, she spoke with rapid vehemence.

'It is evident,' she said, 'that the last speaker has not known the beatitude of sorrow. She imagines that the terms "suffering" and "unhappiness" are synonymous, whereas suffering does not even necessitate unhappiness. She asserts that every means for promoting happiness should be employed. Let me assure her, then, that

suffering is one of the surest means, in that it purifies the nature and renders it capable of a higher, deeper, and truer happiness. Self-renunciation does not contradict the law of the duty to oneself, for the eternal paradox is also an eternal verity, and only in the losing of self can the true self be found. True progress is gained through altruism; and individualism is the process, and not the end, of altruism.

‘As far as I understood the paper under discussion,’ she continued, ‘I cannot see that it any way inferred that the ultimate end of progress was unhappiness, but only that there is no progress without pain. Again, the second speaker mentioned silent, gradual advance, of which the completed work was the sole sign; for my part, I have not seen that completed work, and am therefore not in a position to admire or judge of the gradual, silent advance. As an

instance in nature, I can only think of a glacier, of which the traces of its progress are visible in rocks ground to pieces, whilst others are scarred and seamed in proof of that "gradual, silent advance." I know there are those who would shut their eyes to the sorrow in the world, who confound it with pain, and happiness with mere pleasure. But I think a deeper search into the ways and means of life will lead them to see traces of progress in the scarred, seamed faces of a down-trodden humanity ; they will in time learn to regard pain as a danger-signal, warning men of the need for progress, and of the discord within their ranks. The same speaker also referred to the proposer's having set up a false ideal. But, without an ideal, work is impossible, and we women of an advancing humanity must be, before all things, not dreamers, drifting hither and thither on every tide

of thought, but workers, steadfast in aim and unswerving to our ideal.'

A pause followed this speech, and nothing further of any interest was said. The debate concluded with the summing-up of the proposer. After a brief answer to all the numerous queries and objections raised, she re-asserted the statements made in her paper: she affirmed that the moment of battle was not the time to be thinking of victory, and that in the same way the period of struggling with social evils was not the time to be thinking of a vague personal happiness. "It may be," she quoted in conclusion, "that the gulfs shall wash us down: It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles." If not,' she confidently exclaimed, 'it is for us to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.'

Linda did not attach herself to any one of the little groups into which, after the

debate was over, the members formed themselves; alone she left the club and walked down Oxford Street and turned into the Park. There were the usual knots of curious idlers standing round a vociferating negro declaiming his cheap assurances of salvation through vicarious atonement. How strangely the contrast struck Linda between this man's view of progress and that to which she had just been listening!

‘It has all been done for you, brother! Come to the Lord and accept His finished work. Yes! His finished work: you have nothing to do, nothing to doubt. The gift of salvation is free—take it!’ shouted the negro, thumping his bible to give emphasis to words which lacked the force of conviction. How different was the method of those quiet, earnest women whom Linda had just left! How infinitely preferable the

doctrine of self-reliance, of self-development, to this unreal shifting of responsibility to the shoulders of another !

Linda passed quickly on. For her the old ideas existed no longer. Her salvation lay in the new. She was used to going about by herself, accustomed to being independent ; but, somehow, on such occasions as these she felt lonely. She missed Mark, and longed for him to talk to, and sympathise with her.

She noticed the night effects : the gas-lamps, the dark bulk of buildings on each side standing out against the lesser darkness of the summer sky. The first quarter of the moon looked steely and cold in the vastness of the blue beyond ; as Linda looked up she seemed to realise something of the calm of Eternity above the restlessness of Time. She stood at the edge of the pavement waiting for her particular omnibus : an eager group of tired Sunday holiday-makers

around her, pressing impatiently to find room for themselves and prevent others from getting places before them. She glanced up questioningly as each omnibus lumbered into sight, only to be disappointed. After what appeared to be an interminable time she climbed to the top of the familiar red vehicle, seating herself on the seat immediately behind the driver. She liked to watch the clever turns and ingenious twistings of the uncouth omnibus as it proceeded on its way. Soon, however, she regretted the position she had chosen. The horses were tired out, and it was only by incessant slashing that they could be kept up to their pace. The repeated swish of the whip caused her a sort of sickening sensation, and the words of the proposition rushed to her mind : *No progress without pain !*

She glanced from the straining horses to the pedestrians, and again the force of it was

brought home to her in the tired walk and wearied looks seen by the glimmering light of the gas-lamps. It was with feelings of bitter resentment that she looked at the brilliantly lighted houses with their stucco porticoes and pretentious frontage. There at least one would say there was 'no pain.' But was there progress?

The debate had made her feel restless. What if it were, after all, true, and her theory of happiness a pretty illusion! She was glad to leave the omnibus and walk the short remaining distance home. Perhaps, after all, before it was possible to understand happiness it was necessary to realise pain, or the necessity of pain; yet Linda would not believe it, and she wished, as she wearily climbed the many stairs to her rooms, that the words would not ring so persistently in her ears: 'He that loseth his life shall find it.'

CHAPTER III

‘La chose la plus amusante de cette vie c’est de conquérir ; aussi est-il très difficile de renoncer à une conquête à faire en faveur d’une conquête faite ?’—COMTESSE DIANE.

‘It must be so interesting to write a play !’

‘It is—when the play interests other people !’

‘Come and tell me how you begin : isn’t it very difficult to know when to end a scene ?’

‘It’s all a question of technique : neither easy nor difficult exactly, but a mere matter of experience and judgment—and of taste too, of course.’

‘How interesting ! You really must come and dine with us—papa will like to meet you.’

‘I shall be charmed—though I never dine out as a rule.’

This was the substance of Mark Sergison's first *tête-à-tête* with Celia Adair—the girl who had taken his fancy in the duchess's box on the second night of his play—and he felt unaccountably pleased at her asking him to her house to meet her father. She was bright, clever at social small-talk, and apparently well informed, though it was not very easy to tell, with a quick, adaptive mind like hers, whether her reading was of books or of their reviews. She always said of herself that it was absurd to call her clever unless people were prepared to say that her cleverness consisted in appearing so. Undoubtedly men found her good company, and were wholly unaware that the chief reason for this was that she was an excellent listener, and possessed the knack of making exactly the right monosyllabic replies indispensable to a *tête-à-tête* with a man. Women seldom liked her, because she rarely took any pains

to conceal her contempt for them, unless they were social somebodys and could be useful to her. She was still quite young, but, having lost her mother early and lived at several foreign courts with her father—a diplomat—she had acquired an old manner and a self-possession beyond her years. English girls were afraid of her, and she detested them; her only friends were married women who had seen life and could understand what Celia was pleased to call ‘the world’—by which she meant a Bohemia of her own, wherein Mrs. Grundy was offered a back seat though not altogether discredited.

She had evening coffee-parties in London, where she would expound her views on social subjects to a select audience of both sexes, and where she invariably attracted the latest society lion. She was a little bit weary of political lions. English politics bored her inexpressibly, for there was so

little intrigue—euphemistically called diplomacy—about them : the Irish question was unsolvable so long as such (to her) impossible Irishmen were allowed in London society ; and as for women's suffrage or marriage with a deceased wife's sister, she could not interest herself sufficiently in the subjects to consent to discuss them. Artists were beginning to pall upon her—that is to say, English artists : she found them too serious, too much in love with their work to have time to fall in love with her, and Celia could not exist without an assortment of undeclared lovers. As soon as they became restive and demonstrative, she dismissed them ; her latest had been a young sculptor of no mean pretensions to fame. However, he had been rash enough to 'come on,' as she termed it, too quickly to please her deliberate soul, and she gave him his *congé* after the third week of his acquaintance.

She was just beginning to sigh for a new type.

And Mark Sergison happened to appear on her horizon at that particular moment.

On the morning after the production of the play, she had ridden round to pay a visit to the Duchess of Canterbury, whom she found in the act of writing a note to ask Celia to come and see it that same evening.

The invitation was readily accepted, and directly Sergison was pointed out to Celia, she made up her mind to subjugate him; and his half-shy, half-eager, and wholly independent air when he was introduced to her at supper, later, determined her to attach him speedily to her car, and to drag him through London after her as she had done with so many others.

Actors she rather avoided as being undependable and generally impecunious; but

a playwright, or, as it is the fashion to call him, 'dramatic author,' was a new experience, and one worth attempting—especially when the author in question had deep-set grey eyes that looked as if they could be very eloquent if they chose, and an unmistakable air of refinement not always associated with genius.

The Adairs lived in Green Street, Park Lane—chosen as an accessible locality, and in keeping with their position in society.

Celia objected to a big house, for she preferred cosiness to magnificence, and Mayfairian comfort to Belgravian splendour.

Mark had accepted her invitation with alacrity, and as he dressed for dinner he felt an elation at the prospect of a second meeting with the girl who had so fascinated him that boded ill for Linda's influence over him.

He was the first guest to arrive; and so

unaccustomed was he to the routine of dining out, that he felt absolutely embarrassed when the Adairs' man-servant helped him to take off his coat in the peculiarly deft and almost tender manner special to the well-trained London valet.

He felt nervous lest that critical eye should notice the shininess of his only dress-coat, and looked with gratitude upon the subdued lamps that lighted the hall, lending their friendly shade to conceal his shabbiness.

The narrow staircase was decorated with mezzotints, and a mirror placed at a curious angle on the first half-landing, in front of which were grouped a few palms and tall lilies, created the illusion of a conservatory. At the drawing-room door, which was curtained with heavy Eastern draperies of a peculiar deep-red colour, the man-servant paused, and Mark had time to admire an

extremely fine bronze figure holding a lamp in one hand and a sword in the other.

‘*Lux et perseverentia*,’ was written around the lamp, and it struck Mark as an uncommon blending of attributes.

It was the Adair motto, as he afterwards learnt. Already the atmosphere of the house seemed to him inexpressibly soothing and restful after the bare, cold ugliness of his own barrack-like dwelling; and when the door was thrown noiselessly open and he was ushered into the drawing-room, the spell of sensuous beauty over him was complete.

A screen partly hid the room on first entering it, and tables covered with knick-knacks of all kinds stood about in studied disorder. A semi-grand piano filled up one corner upon which photographs, flowers, and a few choice bits of Oriental china were arranged with artistic perception of colour and proportion.

The room was a complete reflection of its owner's mind, and was a combination of Art and Artificiality.

In the opposite corner was a low, deep sofa, in which his hostess was now seated, imbedded in cushions of abnormal size and soft in texture, amongst which she looked like a fair flower, a pale rose-blossom against a background of tender greens and yellows.

She was dressed in white unrelieved by colour, and her complexion was the only brilliant thing about her. In this respect she called art to her aid, but was such an adept at it that even women were for the most part puzzled to know whether that exquisite pink colour was a fixed quantity or variable.

She half rose to greet her guest, and extended a soft white hand, which left in his a distinct perfume, for ever after to be associated with herself.

‘It is so good of you to come to-night,’ she said in a slightly *empressé* manner: ‘I know you must be so engaged.’

‘Not at all, I assure you. As I told you the other night, I seldom dine out, except with bachelor friends.’

‘But why?—too busy writing?’

‘Yes—and other things.’

‘What other things?—tell me.’

‘Oh, they wouldn’t interest——’ he began, but the expression of mild astonishment in her face checked him, and he felt as if he were her subject all at once, and forced to obey her. ‘I mean, they are—they would seem dull to you,’ he stammered.

She leant her elbow on one of the most solid cushions, and rested her chin on her hand, as she looked directly at him and said in a low, quiet voice—

‘I am sure nothing that you do is dull—you would make it seem worth hearing about.’

To Mark, accustomed to brusque truths from Linda, such a speech was slightly embarrassing, and he for a moment felt uncomfortable. He was all the while conscious that he was being sucked into a current of life utterly different, not only from that in which he lived, but in which he thought a short while ago he desired to live. Its very seductiveness dizzied him and dulled his judgment. Feminine flattery he had always avoided and despised, and had consequently tasted but rarely of its sweets. Celia was clever enough to see that this was an unstormed citadel.

She could therefore afford to skirmish.

‘How can you find material for writing, if you shut yourself up and go nowhere?’ she asked, as he paused before answering her former remark.

‘I don’t shut myself up,’ he replied: ‘I go about amongst men and women of a

certain class. I merely meant that the land of fashionable society was an unknown territory to me.'

'Oh, but who cares about fashionable society! I detest it myself, and I shun it almost as much as I expect you do,' she exclaimed with affected eagerness.

'Then you do not go to balls and parties every night of your life?' he asked incredulously, for to him she appeared to be the very incarnation of fashion.

She laughed a clear, rippling laugh, and said rather scornfully—

'What an absurd question! I despise that kind of life. I will not live it—I make my own society; and if you are not too proud or too busy, I will give you permission to become a member.'

'I shall only show my pride in accepting your gracious invitation,' he rejoined, bending his grave eyes upon her.

‘ But you have not yet told me what you do with yourself. You cannot write plays all day and every day. How long does it take to write one—a good one—like yours, for instance ? ’

‘ It took me a year, all but a fortnight, from the day I began it.’

‘ How did you learn the knack ? I met a celebrated French dramatist once who told me no one could write a play who had not acted one. Have you ever tried the stage ? ’

‘ Not as a regular profession ; but in order to become familiar with stage management and stage ways, I played a very insignificant part for a few months at the Lyceum. But by profession I am a journalist.’

‘ Oh ! do you write leading articles ? No ! of course the editor does that. What branch of journalism is yours ? Art criticism ? Political reporting ? What are your politics ? ’

Her running flow of questions were not

easy to answer all at once—usually she expected a reply to her last query.

‘My politics,’ he said rather hesitatingly, ‘are of the same shade as those of my *Heir-Presumptive*——’

‘What! not a Socialist! a Radical! Oh, Mr. Sergison, what will my father say! You must not disclose your opinions in his hearing. But to me you may talk as much as you like. I love queer notions, and I am sure you are full of odd ideas about property and money and all that sort of thing. Now, is it not so?’

He smiled. He supposed his ideas were ‘odd’ when compared to those of her world. He felt disinclined to talk about them to-night, and reverted to the subject of his play.

‘Some day I will expound my political creed, Miss Adair,’ he said; ‘but to-night I want a holiday from serious thought. I wish, however, that you should know that

whereas I am gaining all the plums from the pudding, there is some one else who ought to be sharing them.'

'Some one else?' she said quickly.

'A collaborator in my work,' he added.

'What! another recluse like yourself—or perhaps more so?'

'Precisely.'

'Oh, but this is really very interesting; you must bring him without delay to see me. I will not frighten him, I promise you.'

'It is not a "him," it is a "she."'

'Oh!——'

Celia's tone altered conspicuously. Perhaps after all the man was married. Rapidly she reviewed this possibility. Married men suited her, for some reasons, far better than bachelors; but she wanted an unattached slave just now, and it would have annoyed her to find that there was a Mrs. Mark Sergison anywhere in the background. By

a kind of instinct he divined what she was wondering, and he hastened to explain himself.

‘ Yes, my partner in success is a girl—a very clever girl, who lives in the flat below mine in Anstey Buildings, and who has helped me entirely to make my play what the critics are good enough to consider original.’

Was this better or worse than a wife ? Celia wondered, and could not make up her mind without a personal inspection of the lady.

Again she used her favourite exclamation—

‘ How interesting ! I should like to meet her. Is she young ? Why didn’t she come forward with you as joint-author ? and why isn’t her name to it ? ’

‘ That ’s just it—she won’t. Her name is Linda Grey. She is so awfully modest, she——’

The door opened, and an elderly man entered, whom Miss Adair at once introduced as her father. He was followed by the servant announcing a second guest, and thus the *tête-à-tête* was brought to an abrupt conclusion at the very point where it had, to Celia, become interesting.

Mr. Adair was a young-looking man for his age, and what is called 'well-preserved.' His skin was fresh, and he had a slight, upright figure; and his manner had, from living abroad, acquired a foreign grace and suavity which is frequently wanting in middle-aged Englishmen. He did not personally care for the drama, but it was a part of his profession to keep himself informed of all that was going on around him. He knew, therefore, that a play by a man of the name of Sergison was being much talked of just then, and he welcomed the young author cordially. He trusted to his daughter's instincts in the

matter of invitations, and asked no questions.

The other guest was apparently on terms of intimacy with father and daughter. He walked in with an air of familiarity only a little short of ill-bred, shaking hands limply with Mr. Adair and sinking on to the sofa by Celia's side, saying in a patronising tone—

‘Well?’

He was a tall, good-looking man, and Celia introduced him to Mark, with a slight shade of embarrassment, as ‘Mr. Alec Watson.’

Mark thought him insufferable; chiefly, however, because he wore his hair parted down the middle and a diamond shirt-stud. The silence would have become oppressive if dinner had not been announced, fortunately, almost at once.

Celia sprang up and took Mark's arm laughingly, bidding the others to follow, and

on her way down-stairs she talked rather excitedly and at random. Mr. Adair was decidedly *gourmet*, and was accompanied everywhere by his French *chef*, for which his daughter was profoundly thankful. It not only saved her all the trouble of ordering dinner, but it enabled her to invite a guest with a sense of security about the repast which many another woman envied her.

To Mark, accustomed to the most frugal fare, and pledged by his adherence to 'Spade' ideals to the plainest of living, the perfectly appointed table, with its exquisitely served dinner, seemed like a dream of epicureanism; and it appalled him not a little to find himself so keenly appreciative of every detail, when theoretically he condemned the very existence of such luxury. He was a man of strong character but of late development. His bringing-up had been somewhat similar to Linda's, for he

had no kinsfolk now to make claims upon his time or his purse ; and he had early learnt the lesson of self-reliance. For some years he had acted as political secretary to a Conservative Member of Parliament, and this had brought him in contact with men of all sorts and shades of opinion. He had never any sympathy with the Liberals of the day ; it seemed to him as if any strong, self-respecting man must be either an out-and-out Tory, pledged to the ancient feudal ideas of land-tenure and rooted in British traditions, or else a frankly avowed Democrat. And after a considerable struggle with his convictions he decided to give up his pleasant appointment of secretary to a man whose opinions he could not approve, and to throw in his lot with the toilers for daily bread. He joined the Fabians, and for a time believed that he had found a true gospel ; but even there he could not rest

satisfied with all the solutions offered to some of the most complex problems of the day. He read Mazzini, Karl Marx, Proudhon, Lassalle, and all the leading lights of Socialistic thought ; but each one seemed to him to have some limitation which was unworthy, and he was for ever asking himself whether, after all, the human mind was capable of formulating any definite theory which should be found workable by all men of all nations. Increasingly he seemed to see humanity as a vast and trackless ocean bound by the inexorable law of an invisible tide, and restless and ever-changing in its surface presentation ; deep down was the still calm of an inaccessible region, from which the deepest diver brought up fresh material for speculation and unsatisfied longing for further knowledge. His meeting with Linda Grey had been an epoch in his life, for she revealed to him the necessity in his own

nature for a woman companion, although she never inspired him with the faintest emotion of a tender kind for herself. It was only that she awoke in him the *ewig Weibliche*, and he was perpetually wondering where and when he would come across his individual *Weib*. Women, as a rule, annoyed him—they seemed to be in a perpetual state of fuss over details which were utterly unimportant; and Linda was to him restful in her brusqueness, in that she did not worry over trifles or trouble her head about feminine fripperies. Yet here was he, sitting at a luxurious dinner-table, talking with unaccountable ease and pleasure to a woman who, from the top of her head to the sole of her foot, was essentially a feminine woman, presumably given to all the peculiarities he most disliked in women.

Here, once more, his theories broke down. Celia Adair ought to be detestable—he was

rapidly coming to the conclusion that she was adorable !

The conversation was fairly general during dinner-time, and Mark was conscious that the other guest, Watson, was trying all the time to draw him out, and to refute every statement that he attempted to make. Celia, with infinite tact and skill, turned the conversation always pleasantly ; but she was also aware that the two men were naturally antagonistic, and would not agree well together.

Watson had invited himself, or Celia would never have asked him to meet Mark.

Mr. Adair was not a great talker at dinner-time, for he was too much absorbed in the analysis of his food to be able to give his attention to other topics. Once he looked up in the interval of the courses, and remarked that he was glad to see the French Government was taking strong measures against the Anarchists ; and he

turned to Mark with a bland smile, and asked him 'what were his politics?'

'I was secretary to a Tory M.P. for a time,' answered Mark; 'so it is scarcely to be wondered at that I took the opposite line myself.'

'That is the kind of reason a woman would give for her opinions,' remarked Celia. 'I thought you men had convictions, not opinions.'

'We are as perverse as some women, I fancy, Miss Adair,' he rejoined, smiling. 'Perversity supplies an impetus to minds that are not very original. However,' he added more gravely, 'I have one or two very decided convictions, for I am an advanced——'

'Not Radical! my dear sir, not Radical!' ejaculated Mr. Adair in a tone of genuine alarm.

'Oh, papa, Mr. Sergison has written such

a witty play, you must really allow him to hold what political opinions he pleases.'

Mr. Adair looked doubtful, and murmured something about political plays being the most dangerous form of poison to the popular conscience, when suddenly his attention was diverted from the topic of politics to the consideration of his dinner, and he exclaimed with vehement irritation—

'Where on earth did Charlemagne learn to send up such a sauce as that! Positively noxious!'

Charlemagne was the *chef*, so called after a fancied resemblance to a picture of that monarch. The remark diverted the conversation, and Celia appealed to Mark for his opinion of the sauce, declaring herself delighted with it.

'I am afraid I am no judge,' he responded ruefully; 'I have a very uneducated palate.'

Mr. Adair dropped his fork and looked at him aghast.

‘Then, possibly,’ said Watson, joining in at this stage, and speaking contemptuously, ‘you would scarcely have detected the hand of the most experienced *chef* in the dinner you have just been eating?’

‘I can always detect perfection, Mr. Watson,’ Mark replied, quietly ignoring the tone adopted towards him; ‘but I could not have pronounced on anything to-night as falling short of it.’

This speech mollified Mr. Adair, who was beginning to feel anxious about this new young man of Celia’s, since he was a Philistine in the matter of culinary art.

‘Then I suppose that wretched tomato dressing to the salad we have just had did not strike you as a never-to-be-repeated atrocity?’ pursued the irate host; for there were days when Charlemagne ran imminent

risks of dismissal, and this was one of them.

‘ I am afraid I must plead guilty to not having even touched the salad, Mr. Adair,’ said Mark ; ‘ but I hope I may be forgiven when I say that what Miss Adair was saying to me at that moment drove everything else out of my head.’

‘ I ?—oh, what did I say that was so extraordinary ?’ asked Celia with a puzzled face.

‘ One of your “ Celiarisms,” I expect,’ put in Watson in an undertone.

She gave him a quick smile, and turned again to Mark.

‘ You were telling me you knew Russian,’ he said, ‘ and I was thinking I would be bold enough to ask you to help me with a play of Ostrofsky’s that I want to translate.’

‘ Oh, a play ! a Russian play !—of course I will help you,’ she exclaimed. ‘ Is it an

improper one? Russian plays often are. What is the plot?’

‘It is a very interesting play,’ said Mark quietly; ‘it has a political plot.’

‘That is sure to be dull; for, if it is Russian politics, it means simply Nihilism, and that is not amusing. Don’t waste time over a Nihilist play, Mr. Sergison—translate a good, stirring human drama. Russian women are so interesting as heroines—they’re so dramatic at all times, and especially on the stage.’

‘You have been in Russia, then?’ Mark asked.

‘Ah, no! but I’ve known some delightful Russians on the Continent—oh! fascinating ones, I assure you.’

‘When Miss Adair begins about Russia or the Russians, Mr. Sergison, let me warn you to prepare for a rhapsody,’ said Watson rather acidly.

‘Nonsense, Alec,’ said Celia sharply—‘I never rhapsodise over any one; only, I happen to have liked all the Russians I ever met, and that is saying more for them than I could of Englishmen.’

‘Considering you’ve known about a dozen Russians, I suppose, and scores of Englishmen, I’m not surprised,’ retorted Watson.

‘Not at all,’ she replied. ‘Russians have a peculiar fascination for me; they have a charm of manner all their own, which Englishmen certainly have not.’

‘Crushing, that! I call it.’

‘Yes, no doubt. I wish you would be so crushed, though, that you’d learn Russian ways and cultivate the art of fascination—you Englishmen. You are so blunt and boorish—speaking generally, of course, I mean,’ she added with a sweep of her hand, ‘and present company always excepted’

‘ Oh, don’t except us,’ said Watson calmly. ‘ I know bears can dance, while lions only roar ; but the lion is the king of beasts all the same, Celia.’

‘ Yes, you’ve just hit upon a peculiarly British notion, Alec ; it is the Englishman’s idea of himself as a king of beasts—it was your epithet, mind, not mine, though I might have thought of it all the same—that makes him so unbearable in comparison with men of other nationalities.’

‘ Well, but allow, for the sake of argument, that all men are beasts, and then that the lion is the British emblem, and you come to my point that the lion is the king of beasts, and therefore an Englishman is the king of men. Better to be king, anyhow, than an ordinary creature.’

‘ Kings are very ordinary creatures sometimes,’ said Celia.

‘ Or very extraordinary—which?’ hazarded

Mark, joining in this dialogue for the first time, and feeling rather amused by it.

‘Are you intensely British, Mr. Sergison?’ asked Celia, turning suddenly to him.

‘God forbid! I was going to say, Miss Adair; but, anyhow, I mean—no, certainly not. I am cosmopolitan, international, in my sympathies.’

‘Unpatriotic!’ said Watson abruptly.

‘Patriotism is only an extended form of egotism,’ said Mark rather energetically; and then he pulled himself up, fearing to offend Mr. Adair.

‘Well, but egotism is the mainspring of progress, surely,’ said Watson. ‘If self-interest did not impel men to action, what else could? It is simply the basis of action, and patriotism only means the combined self-interest of a nation to press onward and outward.’

‘But a nation has nothing to do with its

own progress independently of race progress ; anything that gives one nation dominance over another is proof of that nation's retrogression, not progress along the path of human advancement.'

'What do you say to England's conquests in the East, then ? Is our nation inferior to the Hindoo because it is the dominant race out there ?'

'I don't see the superiority of the English over the Oriental that most people do, I must confess.'

'Oh, then, it's no use arguing with you. I see you are of the "Perish India" school, and so——'

'And so, if you please, gentlemen, we will adjourn this debate—or, at any rate, I will leave you to fight it out,' said Celia, rising as she spoke.

Her two guests rose, and both moved to open the door for her. Mark reached it

first, and she bent her head towards him as she passed out, saying softly—

‘ Don’t argue, please, all night, and forget me up-stairs ;’ and then, turning quickly to Watson, she said shortly—‘ Come up soon ; I want some music.’

‘ I ’ll come now,’ said he, looking round at Mr. Adair, who was holding a decanter of very old port up to the light critically, and absorbed, evidently, in his thoughts about it. As she made no reply, he followed her out of the room, leaving Mark to a *tête-à-tête* with his host, in which for the next twenty-five minutes he had to listen to a long dissertation on the merits of foreign cellared wines over English, and the various impositions that the British consumer was ignorant of having played upon him—a subject which bored him so indescribably that he could hardly refrain from making an effort to change the topic of conversation.

Once in the drawing-room, Watson closed the door carefully, and, coming quickly up to Celia, he said irritably—

‘What made you ask that fellow here?’

‘Which fellow?’ she said innocently.

‘That prig—that infernal prig, Sergison, of course. Celia, you are hopelessly incautious. What do you know of him beyond his play?’

‘Oh, a lot.’

‘What sort of lot?—a bad lot, I should say.’

‘Well, and what of that? I can take care of myself.’

‘No, that’s just what you can’t do.’

‘Thanks! Since when have I become a fool, may I ask?’

‘Oh! women are all more or less foolish about a notoriety. Remember, this man has no antecedents to speak of, no family, no relations that anybody has heard of—he is

a pure adventurer. And his opinions—well, you heard what they are. He isn't a fit person for you to take up, Celia—he isn't, really.'

'Really!'

'Oh, yes, I know you won't take advice, and you'll get yourself into a mess, and then you'll say your friends might have given you a hint.'

'No, I shan't—I have my own reasons for wishing to know Mark Sergison.'

'Oho!'—Watson raised his eyebrows. Celia's 'reasons' were as feminine as the rest of her, and consisted usually of her own inclinations.

'What have you been doing to-day?' asked Celia abruptly, by way of changing the subject.

'Nothing much—except——'

'Leave out the nothing and tell me the exception.'

‘Well, I’ve been giving Elsa another English lesson.’

‘The fourth?—I forget.’

‘The third—it is as well to be accurate.’

‘The third, is it? Well, you conjugated your favourite verb, I suppose? What was the tense to-day?’

‘Please explain.’

‘Don’t be dense—the verb “to flirt.” Was it still the future tense or the subjunctive?—that we might, could, would, or should “flirt”?’

‘Celia, what do you mean? I never flirt with Elsa—you know I don’t.’

‘Oh, no! you only—let me see, what is it you call it? “You are only as nice as you know how.” Of course, I forgot—that isn’t flirting.’

‘Well, so long as the other person is doing the same, where’s the harm? I don’t see.’

‘Oh, no harm! I never said there was; but one of these days you’ll come tearing here, and you’ll fling yourself on to my sofa and bury your head in my cushions and say, “Oh, Celia, here’s another muddle I’m in—help me out of it.”’

Watson laughed, and then said rather huffily—

‘I’m sure I shan’t—not with Elsa Kronstadt. I suppose I can teach an opera-singer English without her falling in love with me.’

‘But there’s always the off-chance of such a thing,’ suggested Celia.

‘Well, I can’t help it if she does. I’ve told her frankly enough that I’m not susceptible, and that I’m only anxious to help her on at first. It’s hard for a foreigner, especially a Swede, to get on in London unless she knows English; and it’s only kind to do what I can for her, seeing her uncle was so well known to grandfather. Of

course, if she becomes tiresomely fond of me, I shall drop her—nothing will be easier.’

‘Of course, very easy for you ; her feelings don’t count.’

‘Don’t be sarcastic, Celia.’

‘I’m not—I never am. What does your grandfather say to your taking up this girl?’

‘He doesn’t know much about it.’

‘Dear me! Alec Watson actually doing anything without his grandfather’s knowledge! The end of the world must be coming.’

‘What a nasty mood you’re in to-night, Celia! What has happened?’

‘I’m in a particularly benign mood: I always am when I’ve found a new interest.’

‘And that is—may I ask?’

‘A dramatic author.’

‘Ye gods! and I am to stand by and see you flirt with that—that—fellow, am I?’

‘Not *flirt*, Alec—you forget.’

‘Well, hang it, you’ll go and “be as nice as you know how.”’

‘Yes; you and I are singularly alike in our readiness to be nice to people, aren’t we, Alec?’

She threw back her head and looked at him with a gleam of something between defiance and invitation in her eyes; he made a rapid movement towards her, when voices were heard on the stairs, and Celia swiftly turned round and walked to the piano.

‘Play me a Chopin “ballade,”’ she said abruptly.

‘I can’t,’ he answered under his breath; ‘I’ll play a Waldteufel waltz instead.’

CHAPTER IV

‘ You—and I did not know !—
Were in the world with me !
And nothing between us there
But land and sea.’—ANON.

ALEC WATSON was a very fair specimen of that modern product of civilisation—a Londoner. Just as there are Frenchmen and Parisians, so there are Englishmen and Londoners.

An Englishman may become a Londoner in an incredibly short space of time—a Londoner can never become a mere Englishman. Even though he may turn his back upon the marvellous city and bury himself in weald, wold, or wild, he will bear the impress somewhere on his personality of Babylon the Great. And it takes a Lon-

doner to detect the mark ; for it is an indefinable something in gait, manner of speech, and habit of thought which is purely artificial to the man himself, and yet is so strong in itself as to be inseparable from his nature.

Shallow women thought Watson clever, clever women thought him shallow ; and yet he was wholly neither and partly both. He thought just deeply enough to make him read, but he read not deeply enough to make him think. He bought books by the dozen and scored them with pencil-marks ; and the people to whom he lent the books thought the marks very interesting and very indicative of their owner's mind and opinions, whereas in reality the marks were often placed against the only passages which he had read or comprehended, and were as misleading as cross-road sign-posts from which the lettering has been obliterated.

Nevertheless, Watson was decidedly a popular man ; in fact, the one grievance he had against his fate was that women would fall in love with him without the smallest provocation, and he professed to one or two of his intimates that the fact annoyed and bored him. When they suggested, however, that he could put an end to the inconvenience either by marrying and devoting himself to a domestic life, or by shunning the society of women altogether, he would shake his head and pucker his forehead, saying dolefully—

‘My dear old chap, you don’t know me a bit ; that would not meet my case at all.’

Celia Adair was the chief confidante of his woes or his conquests. She had never shown any inclination to fall in love with him herself, and met him at all times with a frank *camaraderie* that should have put an end at once and for ever to all idea of

conquest on either side. That it did not achieve its object was the result of circumstances governed by opportunity.

Alec's father had died when he was a mere infant, and, to the great disgust of her first husband's people, his mother speedily married again. Not being a very strong-minded woman or particularly tenacious of her first-born, Mrs. Watson agreed to give him up to his grandfather as a conciliatory offering ; and thus it came about that the boy grew up, spoilt and indulged by a maiden aunt, his father's only sister, from whom he imbibed the set dogmas of that wonderful and complex organisation—London Society. He was sent to a public school to learn manners and illegible handwriting, and to college to acquire proficiency in the art of making friends with the mammon of unrighteousness ; and then he was called into his grandfather's study,

where the plan of his future life was unfolded to him like the first mystery to an initiate of a secret order.

‘Your education is now completed,’ said the old man gravely and solemnly. ‘You have not distinguished yourself, neither have you disgraced yourself; so far, I am satisfied, for I expected neither. You are aware that your mother and I have nothing to say to one another, and that you are now at liberty to choose between us for the remainder of your life. I am willing to give you a home and an allowance of £200 a year for dress and pocket-money; and so long as you never let yourself get mixed up in any disgraceful scandals, or show any low propensities, I shall be always ready to meet any little extra expenses you may be put to in your life, or to give you a cheque now and then to cover the expenses of a foreign trip when I think you require

it. In good time I shall hope to see you make a suitable'—and great emphasis was laid on this epithet—'marriage with some lady of good social position and amiability of temper ; but, as I highly disapprove of early marriages and of large families, and also, I may add, of young widows, I trust that you will give your mind, for the next ten or twelve years, to making a livelihood and saving an income out of your profession—and that profession, Alec, I desire should be——'

Alec's eyes opened wider, and he gasped with dread lest that profession should be the law. Nothing he dreaded so much. To begin with, he had no argumentative faculty ; and, secondly, he was sure a barrister's wig would give him a beastly headache and a bald head.

'Yes, grandfather,' he said breathlessly, 'it is to be—what?'

‘ Broking,’ said his grandfather solemnly. Then after a pause, during which Alec made no sign either of relief or dismay, he continued—‘ Not stock or share broking, but general broking in a big firm of dealers with a very large foreign connection—principally China and the East. At first you will be, of course, only in the office learning the business ; in a year or two you will rise to a head clerkship ; and in time I intend to make you a partner in the firm—I have seen the heads of the business and arranged this with them. That is to say, of course, with your acquiescence ;’ and here the old gentleman bowed, with a courteous wave of his hand, as if he were leaving the young man entirely free to refuse the offer. ‘ On the other hand, I may tell you,’ he added, ‘ that you are at liberty to go and make your home with your mother, or to choose any other line of life you may prefer.

I don't wish to coerce you in any way—you are old enough by this time to know what sort of life you wish to lead. I have now stated my plan fairly and entirely to you—I will give you a week to decide and let me know the result of your cogitation.'

'Thank you, grandfather,' said Alec, laconically; 'I will think it over—thank you very much.' Virtually it was Hobson's choice, and the grandfather knew it; for Alec's mother had married a popular but vulgar, pug-nosed Dissenting minister in a provincial town, and she had now a large and thriving family of pug-nosed children of whom his aunt, the irreproachable London-bred Miss Catherine Watson, never spoke without a violent shudder. Alec as a boy had never been allowed to pass a snub-nosed child in the street without being told by his aunt, with a half-closing of eyelids and a sigh escaping through set teeth—

‘That, my dear Alec, is the type your mother has produced in your step-brothers and sisters.’

Life in a provincial town with puggy relations and blatant Dissent, in contrast to the quiet, well-regulated, luxurious London household : a clumsy, wide-mouthed maid-servant speaking with a broad Midland accent, in exchange for the well-modulated, purring voice of the London butler : nickel-silver, or at best electro-plate, for Queen Anne silver : marsala, or possibly temperance drinks, for wines of ancient cellarage and still more ancient vintage : ‘high tea,’ in all its hideous indigestibility, for the daintily served little dinners : and, worst of all to Alec’s fastidious mind, ill-gloved, ill-shod, badly corseted young women overflowing at his mother’s tea-parties, and giggling provincially at him over their substantial Midland muffins.

On the other hand, he detested business, and his tastes were literary, musical, and artistic rather than commercial. He could play remarkably well on the piano, and carried a guidebook to the National Gallery to the church which his aunt expected him to attend with her, by way of whiling away a tedious service ; he even had a vague and somewhat wild idea of asking to be allowed to study art—conscious in his soul that in order to do so he must first learn the art of study, and that was too irksome to be thought of.

His individuality made no clamour for development, or it would at that critical period of his life have uttered a protest against following either of the plans placed before him. It would have said boldly—‘ Here I am, strong and vigorous and of determined purpose ; let me flounder until I have learnt to swim, and then see what a

course I will strike. Fettered by conditions such as you'—his grandfather—'or you'—his mother—'impose, I shall die of atrophied will; I shall never be my real self, and no one else will be their best selves to me. Luxury and ease are drugs to my soul—give me the stimulus of want, and I will prove that

“No soul to strong endeavour
Yoked for ever
Works against the tide in vain.”’

But his individuality was still in embryo and had never yet breathed; and it took him exactly twenty-five and a half minutes to survey the two alternative situations, and to decide upon the one his grandfather offered him—of ‘honourable captivity.’

The next thing manifestly to be done, in order to make the conditions completely harmonious, was to give his heart over in entire charge to his head, and to screw that on as

tightly as possible. His artistic temperament, or, strictly speaking, that part of his temperament which was artistic, led him sometimes into emotional channels ; but the consciousness of the substantial background of an old cellar, a grand piano, and an available cheque in emergency was by far the strongest element in his life.

At the time of his meeting with Celia Adair he was twenty-eight, and people were just beginning to tire of speculating whom he would marry, and to give him up as a confirmed bachelor.

They met on the Continent, during one of those trips of which old Mr. Watson had spoken when disclosing his project for Alec's future.

It was the year of an Ober-Ammergau Play, and the Adairs had gone over to see it from Vienna, where Mr. Adair was at that time first secretary to the Legation.

Alec chanced to sit next to Celia during one of the performances, and her profile attracted him before she spoke; then her voice completed the sense of satisfaction, for his fine ear was especially sensitive to tones of voice, and Venus herself could never have held him entranced if she had spoken in anything but a musical tone.

It was German that she was talking to her companion—a woman; but although the accent was pure and her words fluent, he could tell that she was English by the pitch of her voice, and also by her whole appearance. Only an Englishwoman of assured breeding could wear a severely neat tailor-gown with such graceful ease. This girl knew how to sit a horse—that was plain from the cut of her shoulders and elbows; and she could dance too, for she was light, he was sure. That she was accustomed to society he could tell from the movements of her

head and the slight, conventional gestures she used with her hands. He determined to find out who she was, and by hook or by crook to manage an acquaintanceship. Fortune favoured him before the end of the performance.

It had been an unusually hot day, and the crowd and solemnity of the representations had a disastrous effect on the nerves of the German woman. She began to gasp and sigh and ejaculate with hysterical appeals to Celia, who looked rather annoyed and not a little embarrassed at the prospect of having to cause an interruption. She almost involuntarily turned to Alec in a sort of confidence that he was an Englishman, and would somehow come to the rescue; and he instantly grasped the opportunity, and said in a quick whisper—

‘Do you want to get her out? Can I be of any use?’

The German woman was corpulent and ponderous, and if she was going to faint dead away in her seat it would take more than one Englishman to carry her out. Plainly the only thing to do was to get her into the air as quickly as possible; and Celia implored her to pull herself together, and to come out as noiselessly as she could. She did not want to disturb this Englishman, or to bring him out with them; but she was not sorry that he did accompany them, and still more glad was she when immediately outside the door the Baronin collapsed altogether and sank, an unconscious heap, in Alec's arms.

It was rather a comic situation. Celia could scarcely help laughing as she stood holding up her companion's dress and shawl, which were sweeping the dust, while this unknown and very well-groomed English stranger was staggering under the lady's

unusual weight with an expression of alarm on his face that was irresistible.

‘Couldn’t you get some water?’ he panted, for he felt he could not sustain his burden much longer, and he thought the situation rather undignified.

A knot of curious passers-by began to congregate round them, and Alec, with a true Briton’s horror of being a spectacle, felt as if he would like to drop the German and get away. But as he could not very well do that, he repeated his demand for water, and was secretly rather disappointed that the girl whose profile he had so admired should be apparently apathetic and useless in an emergency of this kind.

To his intense relief, an empty carriage lumbered down the little street on its way back to Oberau, having deposited a big American family at their destination in the village. Alec signalled to the driver, and

Celia added her voice to his, speaking to the man in the dialect he would understand, and offering him a good bribe to take them into his vehicle.

‘It is only just round the corner; he ought not to want more than a mark,’ she said, laughing, to Alec; ‘but I would pay ten to get the Baroness safe home and out of this broiling sun and gaping crowd. Can you lift her in, do you think?’

Alec gave a superhuman heave of his massive burden, and managed to hoist it into the carriage. Scarlet and panting, he stood back in the road and held the door open for Celia.

‘Oh, you’ll come too, won’t you?’ she said in a pleading tone; ‘how shall I get her out again?’

Even if Celia had not been a pretty woman he could hardly have refused her; but he got in after her with almost a frown on his

face, which she mischievously enjoyed, for, as she told him afterwards, 'it was so delicious to disconcert an Englishman.'

The rapid drive and the freshening breeze, betokening a coming storm, somewhat revived the invalid, and she was able to help herself out of the carriage with the support of an arm on each side.

'Do you stay here?' said Alec, as they alighted at the house of 'Judas,' where he too was putting up; 'it is where I am!'

'Oh!' said Celia, 'how curious!—yes, we are staying here; we arrived last night—ah, there's papa!'

Alec looked quickly round, and saw a man whom he had noticed at the door the night before, and had taken for a foreigner.

Mr. Adair looked astonished at the trio, and Celia hastened to explain the situation.

'I am very much indebted to you, my

dear sir, I am sure,' he began courteously, but Alec stopped him short.

'Not at all, not at all. I assure you it is nothing; pray don't mention it. It was very hot in the theatre. I am glad the lady is better.'

She was staggering towards the house at the moment, and Alec felt relieved to see her retreating form, but he wished that Celia had remained to talk to him. He was so anxious to find out who she was. However, he consoled himself with the reflection that they were bound to meet again at dinner; for whoever the Adairs might be, they could indulge in no 'diners apart' in the house of 'Judas,' and all were obliged to sit at the same long, narrow table.

On leaving London, Alec had allowed his head to unscrew itself just one turn; in Paris, where he had stayed a week, he had given it further licence, but had woke up one

morning at the end of that time to the uncomfortable discovery that it was becoming dangerously loose. Not wishing, therefore, to risk his grandfather's anger, or any curtailment of his pleasures at home, he took refuge in speedy flight, and had come to Ober-Ammergau in a kind of semi-pious determination to give himself up to the study of the Passion Play. Whether Celia Adair, with her pretty profile and piquante figure, was exactly suited to this mood or not, subsequent events alone could decide. He felt just then as if he had recovered his mental balance sufficiently, at any rate, to justify his embarking upon a new experience, even if he had again to seek refuge in flight.

His 'honourable captivity' was beginning to gall him not a little, and for the next few days he should enjoy the company of Celia Adair as one of the legitimate details of his new surroundings.

She had changed her dress for dinner, and was clad in a pretty soft washing silk gown of pale blue, which threw up the fairness of her skin and hair and deepened the colour of her eyes.

‘I hope the Baroness has recovered?’ Alec asked politely, as he took his seat on the opposite side of the table in order to study her full face.

‘Not quite, thank you,’ she replied; ‘she refuses to come down to dinner.’

‘Dinner!’ growled Mr. Adair, who had just appeared, ‘dinner, Celia! don’t blaspheme. Dinner indeed! it is scarcely *grub*, let alone food!’ He groaned so dismally that Alec could not forbear laughing.

‘Rustic fare is evidently not to your taste, sir,’ he said. Mr. Adair gave him an annihilating glance, as if it were profane to joke about so sacred a subject, and the conversation lapsed into commonplace remarks.

Alec was more than ever fascinated by the girl, and indeed both father and daughter attracted him vastly, and were plainly worth cultivating.

They presented a variation from the species he had been thrown most with in London, and he looked forward with pleasurable interest to deepening his acquaintance with them.

Celia was perfectly aware of his interest, being a keen observer of men. She made up her mind to amuse herself as long as she found him entertaining ; but there was a cold, over-trained look about him that did not please her. She knew his type, and on the whole she disliked it.

However, Ober-Ammergau would be intolerable without some kind of mild excitement, and an over-trained Londoner would clearly be better than no one to help her pass the time.

‘Do you smoke?’ she asked him in a confidential tone as they left the table; ‘because I do, and I am wondering where I can indulge in my cigarette without scandalising those British proprieties over there.’

He glanced across the room and saw two elderly women, of the most decidedly ‘Cook’-ite type, regarding Celia with a look of suspicion and dread. ‘Come out for a walk,’ he said promptly. ‘I found a very pretty spot this afternoon where we can both smoke unobserved.’

‘I will go and fetch a hat, then,’ she said, and ran off as she spoke, returning a moment later with a parasol and a pair of loose soft gloves, which she drew on slowly as she walked beside him. He noticed her feet, and how well shod they were, and how lightly she poised her neat, small figure upon them.

‘Now,’ she said, looking him full in the face as they left the street and turned off

into the country, 'where is your shady nook—for I hope it is shady? Fancy having had one's dinner and the sun still so high and so powerful. You are not shocked at my wanting to smoke?'

'I! certainly not!' he replied, smiling reassuringly.

'But your London women don't smoke,' she exclaimed.

'How do you know I am accustomed to London women? Besides, many of them do smoke.'

'Do they? They must have improved, then, since I last knew them.'

'Where do you live, if I may ask?'

'In Vienna.'

'Is that a nice place?'

'Nice!' Celia curled her lips; 'what a banal expression! Vienna is Paradise.'

'Really? in what way? Is it nicer than Paris?'

‘*I* think so; but then of course it depends what one wants in a place. Paris would be nice enough if there were a Monarchy; but as a Republic—well, it’s poor fun for people like us, don’t you know.’

He wondered what ‘people like us’ meant, and she read his perplexity in his face.

‘I mean,’ she said, ‘for diplomatic circles Vienna is a Paradise. My father is secretary to the Legation, and of course we know all the best Austrian people.’

‘Ah! I see. You’d like London, then.’

‘I shouldn’t, I don’t—I hate it.’

She laughed as he stood still on the path and looked at her with eyes round with astonishment.

‘Yes,’ she added, ‘I do; I hate London. It is heresy, no doubt, to you, a Londoner; but it is the truth.’

‘How do you know I am a Londoner?’ he asked.

‘I couldn’t be mistaken,’ she replied; ‘you don’t look as if you had ever been anywhere else.’

‘But why?’

‘Your clothes——’

‘Oh, come! my clothes, of course, are made there, but then all Englishmen’s are; but I’m sure these are not the kind of clothes one would wear in Piccadilly. What else do you see that is so essentially belonging to London?’

‘Well, your voice, your manner, your—*je ne sais quoi*—you cannot deny that I am right. You are a London man, now—are you not?’

‘Certainly I am; but it puzzles me that you should discover any particular type of Englishman in me. I always feel very nondescript.’

‘Very likely. I never said there was much originality about your appearance.’

He laughed awkwardly. She was certainly frank, but hitherto his vanity had rather led him to avoid frank people.

‘Now you are offended!’ she said merrily.

‘No, I am not,’ he answered rather stiffly. ‘I like people to say what they think. Are Austrians, then, very original, may I ask?’

‘Some are uncommonly so ; they are all charming. Polite, cultivated, delightful ! And they ride and dance superbly.’

‘So do some Londoners.’

‘Perhaps. But they have not that peculiar tact that you find amongst Austrians. Englishmen do not shine in society. They are too blunt and brusque.’

‘Frank and straightforward, I should call it,’ he said, defending his race.

‘Well, that is tiresome, isn’t it? No? Ah, you don’t understand what I mean.’

‘You don’t like liars, do you, surely?’

‘Every man is a liar; that is a Scriptural statement, I believe, and so it must be true.’

‘I don’t agree with you. I don’t lie; to begin with, it is so much less trouble to tell the truth. To tell one lie involves a fatiguing amount of ingenuity to keep it up. I did it once; it took ten years off my life.’

He sighed.

‘She wasn’t worth it, I suppose, eh? Tell me: you’re not married?’

‘Oh, no!’

‘And your profession? let me see—it isn’t medicine; it isn’t the Church, or the army or the navy, or—no, I don’t think it’s the law; is it the City?’

‘That’s a bit vague, but you are not far out. I am in a merchant’s house in the city. I look commercial, then, do I? One likes to know how one strikes people.’

‘I shouldn’t call you striking,’ said she

audaciously, for she rather wanted to make him angry for the fun of it. 'You see, I guessed at once what you were.' Certainly she was a new experience to Alec, accustomed as he was to be made much of by women, and talked to in a deferential sort of way, as became the heir-presumptive to a considerable fortune and a young man of many social qualifications. It put him on his mettle. She was a fascinating little woman, but he was not going to be treated like a bank clerk on a hundred a year and no prospects.

Before he could reply she asked him another sudden question: 'You have no sisters, have you?'

He looked startled. Why should she think not?

'Well, no, I have not, strictly speaking. My mother married again, and she has a lot of children; but I was my father's only son,

and I live with my grandfather and my aunt.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Celia, 'how prim!'

'No, it isn't,' he said, rather brusquely, for she was beginning to irritate him; 'it's very jolly. My aunt is a stunning good sort, awfully clever and up to things, and I can do just as I like.'

'Now you're cross,' she said reproachfully; 'you shouldn't——'

'I'm not cross,' he replied quickly; 'only, you are so accustomed to original Austrians that you think, I suppose, that an Englishman is a fool who lives with his people as I do.'

'Austrians certainly prefer *other* people, I should say,' answered she; 'but go on, tell me some more. Do they let you have a latch-key?'

'Of course,' he began hotly; 'but——'

'But you don't use it.'

'Oh yes, I do, very often.'

‘But your aunt looks out in curl-papers, and shakes her finger at you, and your grandfather—did you say grandfather?—preaches you a lecture next morning on the evils of late hours, etc. etc.’

‘No, my aunt wears what I believe is technically called a “toupée,” and she has a lurking sympathy with dissipation; my grandfather is a model of discretion, and never asks me a question. So you see, mademoiselle, you haven’t quite hit me off even now.’

She did not speak for a few moments, and he looked down at her to see if she were displeased or only meditative, and in a sudden fit of confidence he turned to her and said—

‘Look here; you’re somehow different to any girl I ever met before. I don’t generally confide in women, but I’m going to tell you something—may I?’

She looked up at him with astonishment in her blue eyes, and hesitated for half a second.

‘You think me a booby,’ he continued. ‘I want to explain something. I don’t know why I should—to you, except, as I said, you’re different from other women, and I’d like to have your opinion on the subject. May I?’

‘Yes, if I possess one; but if it’s anything abstruse or—connected with betting or horse-racing, I am no good at all.’

‘It isn’t; it’s about——’

‘A woman?’

‘Not *a* woman, exactly; it’s this—it’s very odd, very horrid perhaps—but I’ve never been in love in my life; I’m twenty-eight, and I don’t believe I shall ever fall in love. Why is that?’

‘That’s nothing remarkable,’ answered she decidedly; ‘it is a sign of the times.’

When a nation begins to go downhill, it's men lose their capacity for loving—a mere matter of history—you can't help it.'

'No, I can't help it, but I should rather like to ; other fellows seem to go through blazing torments and enjoy them, and they say there's nothing like being in love. I've tried dozens of times ; and the women have done their part nobly, I must confess ; but it's no good. They are all alike to me, and I am as happy with any one of them as with the others, and happier still without the whole lot !'

She was silent, and he fancied she was shocked. But her next remark relieved his mind.

'London life produces men like you,' she said : 'none of you are real ; nothing you do is genuine. Your plays are all adapted ; your Shakespeare is bowdlerised ; your hours are artificial ; your art is only imitation ; your

fashions are copied, and your manners and customs are ridiculous. You are all of you so absorbed in playing at life, that none of you have an idea what life really is. Look at your religion, your marriages, your divorces. Aren't they crying proofs of what I say, that Londoners don't live? They are marionettes, dancing to the tune of the Eleventh Commandment, "Thou shalt not be found out."

'Why! an Englishman—a London man—would feel guilty if even the name of his washerwoman were found out. He is ashamed of requiring one; and yet—Heavens! he pays dearly enough sometimes for having his soiled linen washed in public.' She stopped.

Then in a different tone she added: 'So you want me to tell you how to fall in love, do you? Why should I be able to do that?'

'I don't want you to do that, exactly,' he

said seriously ; ‘ I only wanted you to tell me why you thought I couldn’t, for I didn’t know myself ; it appears that it would astonish you more if I could. It isn’t pleasant to discover in oneself a type of degeneracy.’

‘ Oh, but I like you all the better for it,’ she said, smiling brilliantly at him.

His head felt rather shaky.

‘ Thanks,’ he said shortly. ‘ Here we are at the smoking corner ; you must want your cigarette by this time, I am sure.’

The conventional tone had replaced the confidential one, and she detected it at once.

‘ When I tell you that I am a feminine specimen of the same type, we shall be quits, shan’t we ?’

She had taken out a dainty cigarette case and a silver match-box, and was preparing to strike a light. Her eyes strayed for an instant and met his, and he saw for the

first time that he had found a woman who understood him.

‘Want a light?’ she said airily, offering him her cigarette.

‘Thanks!’ he said quietly; ‘do you smoke Turkish or Egyptian tobacco?’

‘Russian,’ she replied laconically. ‘What a pretty spot!—and what did you think of the Passion Play?’

CHAPTER V

‘Friendship demands a religious treatment. Leave it to boys and girls to regard a friend as property, and to suck an all-confounding pleasure instead of the noblest benefit.’—EMERSON.

SINCE the meeting at Ober Ammergau, the friendship between Alec and Celia had strengthened considerably.

They spent a week there, and then travelled for ten days together in the Salz Kammergut, which brought Alec to the end of his financial tether, and the Adairs to the limit of their period of absence from Vienna.

However, they corresponded vigorously. Alec excelled in letter-writing. His mind being that of the pedant rather than of the independent thinker, he, as Schopenhauer

describes it, covered it with bright colours, arranged according to some system, but lacking in depth and coherence. For letters this brightness of colouring was eminently suitable. For literature it would have been too superficial.

But Celia found him a charming correspondent. He told her all the latest London gossip without a suspicion of retailing any of it as scandal, and in return she would regale him with bright witty anecdotes or hazard conjectures, which were clever without being ill-natured, about some of the unfinished dramas that were being enacted around her. Sometimes they would lapse into more sentimental or intimate moods in writing, and a third person might have suspected them both of trying how far they could go without trespassing the border-line between intimacy and familiarity. Certainly it was an interesting correspondence, and one

which, a century later, might very well stand publication.

They were, therefore, mutually well satisfied when, at the end of a year after their meeting, Mr. Adair was transferred to the Court of St. James, and they were able to resume their personal intercourse.

The Adairs had now been six months in London, and Celia and Alec were still apparently on the best of terms. Sometimes her manner puzzled him, and made him question whether after all she did always intend to keep their friendship to the platonic plane ; and on the night when Mark Sergison was dining in Green Street, Alec fancied that Celia's manner had altered.

When, in that brief *tête-à-tête*, she became sarcastic, he felt uncomfortable. He never could be sure if she were laughing at him or with him, and ridicule was the last thing he could accept with dignity.

He had a lurking suspicion that night that she was going to play off this man Sergison against himself, in which case he should certainly feel wildly angry with her ; and these perplexing thoughts occupied his mind as he sat dreamily playing to her, while she sat talking in a low undertone to the other man, apparently engrossed with him and oblivious of aught else.

Celia herself was passing also through a strange mental conflict, which she could not at first comprehend. Her meeting with Mark Sergison, and his keenness, his vigour, and his unconventional manner, brought into sharp contrast the colder, more wooden-natured Alec ; whose mental atmosphere, it seemed suddenly to her, was like his own native fog, and was choking her. With Mark she felt she could take a deep breath of healthy, fearless life, and that it would even be worth while to have her

favourite idols smashed for the sake of being real. The lack of spontaneity in Alec was beginning to irritate her; she was tired of his labelled-and-pigeon-holed ideas, and the very irreproachableness of his appearance annoyed her. She liked Mark's shock head of hair, and would gladly have seen Alec's sleek hair ruffled and disordered, or his scarf riding over his collar. It was the deadly uniformity of respectability which palled upon her and made her welcome a man who was so unknown to 'respectable' society as to have the possibilities in him of disreputability.

Not that Celia had any very distinct aspirations for herself. She knew well that she was incapable of heroism, and that Alec's cast of mind suited her own for more hours in the week than Mark's would. But to-night she felt as if she and Alec had been drifting purposelessly along the

tide of life, and that she now wanted him to quicken his pace and to carry her with him. Discontent with herself and all akin to herself was filling her soul—a kind of sense that she could be superior to her present conditions if she chose, but that she did not choose. She wanted some one else to supply the impetus to a movement which she should wish to lead. To-night there was an epoch-making feeling in the air which excited her; and as she glanced across at Alec seated at her piano playing a barcarolle of Moskowski's, she wondered whether he or Sergison would be the first to recognise the fact that she was ready to stand by either, should the one or the other be willing to create a new era for her.

Something in her glance caused a sense of uneasiness in Alec's mind, and he felt irritated at being set down to play a musical accompaniment to her flirtation. Rising,

therefore, with a sudden hurried look at his watch, as if reminded of a forgotten duty, he strode up to her side and said abruptly—

‘I must be going—good-night.’

‘Oh, why? it is quite early. Your aunt will surely not be sitting up for you, will she?’ said Celia in a sarcastic way, smiling mockingly all the time.

‘My aunt is ill,’ he answered shortly, flushing scarlet as he held the tips of her fingers for a second. ‘I know you think affection for one’s people absurd and out of date, but I am afraid I must still plead guilty to that folly.’

Celia felt slightly abashed for an instant, and half-inclined to say she was sorry to hear that Miss Watson was ill; but recollecting that she had seen her the previous day at a concert, she felt pretty certain that Alec was exaggerating a slight indisposition on purpose to annoy her. Resenting,

therefore, his stilted speech and air of offended dignity, she merely bowed her head and said frostily—

‘Pray, don’t let me keep you. Good-night.’

He shook hands ceremoniously with Mark, and begged Celia to make his excuses to Mr. Adair, and then he left her, walking to the door with a quick short step that told its own tale of jealousy and annoyance.

Mark was all unconscious of the little scene that was being acted before him. He was only supremely satisfied at being left *tête-à-tête* with this girl, whom every minute he found more fascinating and interesting.

He had seen nothing of Linda for some days, and it seemed as if he were living so rapidly that the old days previous to the production of the play were already a part of a bygone age. Even Linda herself was becoming a kind of background figure in a life that was altering every day in point of

circumstance. That dinner and his talk with Celia opened his eyes to a new and utterly unsuspected side to his own nature—a side to which, he saw now, Linda could never have responded. He began to understand why she and women of her kind could never exercise any power or fascination over him—why he should never feel any stronger emotion for her than regard and esteem. He realised that in order for a woman to become an influence in a man's life she must be endowed with something other than intellect, or even beauty of mind and purity of heart. She must be possessed of a subtle charm of refinement, an innate sense of *savoir-faire*, which is in itself repose to a man's storm-driven moods; she must also be capable of showing just enough of the weaker side to her own nature to reveal to a man the need of strength in himself. He knew now why so many clever, strong men

admired and mated with weak, foolish women. It was the inevitable longing for the contrast, the counterbalance to their own natures—a longing with which Mark was suddenly conscious that Celia inspired him, although he dared not yet even surmise whether she would and could satisfy him. Linda gave him intellectual sympathy : Celia appealed to his senses. And until a man has reached the point of development known as *equipoise*, his senses are stronger than his intellect ; and Mark's heart was the master of his head. One morning, about a week after the dinner with the Adairs, he ran down-stairs quite early and knocked at Linda's door.

She opened it with a grave smile, and held out her hand, an unusual greeting hitherto between them.

He wondered what it indicated, and he began half-apologetically—' I'm so sorry

I've not been in lately——' when she stopped him, saying shortly—

'Come in. Have you had breakfast? I can give you some tea directly.'

He followed her into the front room. How bare and ugly it was! how different from the boudoir in which Celia lived!

Linda pushed back the table, which had her breakfast things still upon it; and he contrasted her awkward, angular movements with the grace and elegance of the other woman's.

'I have had breakfast, thank you,' he said, as genially as he could; for he had come to ask her a favour, and he wanted to ingratiate himself with her.

'What have you been doing with yourself all this time?' she asked him in quite a friendly tone, and he tried to answer her naturally and without self-betrayal.

'Oh, I can't tell you how rushed I've

been ; it is quite extraordinary how much work has suddenly come to me. My play still draws full houses, and two managers have been treating with me for plays. I am thinking of adapting that German novel that we were reading last November : do you remember it ?’

‘Oh, Mark, no ! not that horrible book ! It is all hot, unwholesome emotion, and altogether bad art.’

‘I’m not so sure—it would make a very realistic drama.’

‘But why present such a side of nature at all ? Every one knows such women as the heroine Ermengarde exist—women who live on men’s lower passions. Why on earth degrade your talent by depicting such a creature ?’

‘It would make a powerful play. I told Grace Owen the plot—she is aching to act the part of Ermengarde.’

‘But what is Grace Owen to you? Let her ache for bad parts; lots of men can write them for her. Oh, don’t prostitute your art like that; there isn’t a wholesome character, scarcely a healthy line, in the whole of that book. It would nauseate you even to translate it.’

‘I thought you could help me.’

‘I?—not I—I wouldn’t waste my time over such trash, nor help you to do it either. You didn’t seriously come here this morning to ask me that?’

‘That was one of the things I wanted to ask you about. I think, Linda, you take a strained view of life. I have come to the conclusion that hitherto we both have. Lately I have seen another side to some of the questions we used to discuss, and I believe we have been on a wrong tack, in some respects.’

He stopped—it was not easy to talk to

her when she frowned and bent her brown eyes upon his face with a sort of dismay.

‘In *what* respect?’ she asked gravely.

He got up and began fidgeting with the things on her writing-table. He really could not formulate any of his ideas, nor tell her in what way he had changed since he was last there ; but for the sake of saying something, he said in rather a confused sort of way—

‘Oh, about things we used to think wrong—refinement, for instance—even luxury.’

She did not make any remark, and he was silent too, and began making aimless strokes on a sheet of paper lying on the table before him. He was waiting for her to challenge him further. It would be a relief to argue with her ; it would oblige him to define his own opinions, and enable him to know just where he stood.

Linda remained looking out of the window

thinking very deeply over a chance speech that one of the 'Spade' women had made only the day before, which seemed now to be applicable to Mark's case.

'I am sure,' she had said, 'that why so few friendships between men and women last is because women cannot be content to stand where they are and let the men go on alone. No two human beings can ever develop along parallel lines at the same pace, and I believe that development is often retarded by the one putting out a hand to keep the other back.'

Hitherto she and Mark had gone along on parallel lines. Had they now come to a point where he must leave her behind and go on alone? Should she restrain him if it were so? But, ah! if he were not going on, but back: what ought she then to do? Was it advancement or retrogression to recant his opinions about simplicity of life, about arti-

ficiality of civilisation? She was intensely zealous for the cause of true human freedom, and she could bear to lose her friend rather than adopt a false view of human right. Seneca's words recurred forcibly to her: 'It is a common thing for a man to sink under those felicities that raise him;' filling her soul with apprehension lest, indeed, Mark should be about to sink, and that she was powerless to prevent the calamity. However, she felt it was useless, at this juncture, to argue with him, and after a long pause she turned to him and said quietly—

‘If you have changed your opinions about those things upon which we used to agree, I don't think it is any use to argue. I couldn't possibly change mine; and I couldn't, either, help you to translate a book that I think would have been better unwritten. What else did you come to say?’

He threw down the pencil and came over to where she was standing.

‘Linda,’ he said, abruptly, ‘will you do me a favour?’

She looked startled, and drew back from him involuntarily.

‘It isn’t very much after all,’ he added, with a forced laugh, noticing her movement.

‘What is it?’

‘You remember my telling you of my meeting a Miss Adair one night? the second night of the play. Do you recollect?’

She nodded and bit her lips. He continued—

‘Well—she wants—I want her—to come to tea here one day. She said she would like to’—he was just going to say ‘to meet you,’ but checked himself and substituted ‘to see my rooms—my engravings, you know, and one or two of my books; and I thought—I hoped, perhaps—Linda—will

you do the honours and make tea for me? I—I don't think she would like to come unless I—unless there was another lady there. You understand, don't you? You will, won't you?'

His quick, eager tones revealed more than his words, and Linda's heart sank. She felt considerably perplexed how to answer his request, for she was most unwilling to seem jealous of any new-found friend; yet it went so entirely against the grain with her to have anything whatever to do with people who were, she considered, the curse of civilisation—idle, pleasure-loving women of the 'Society' class; and Mark must have known this. Why could this Miss Adair not bring a friend of her own set with her if the customs of her world prohibited her from going alone to a man's rooms? She could not feel called upon to act as a chaperone on such an occasion, and Mark saw in her

face before she spoke that she intended to refuse him.

‘Only this once, Linda,’ he pleaded as she began to speak. ‘I’ll never ask her to come again ; but you see, she half-invited herself—at least she asked me if she could see my books and things ; and—and she wants to know you too.’

There ! He had said it, and he could not help it if it had been an unwise remark.

‘To know *me* ? How ridiculous ! The woman’s flattering you by pretending she is interested in your friends. She made you believe *that* ?’ Linda turned away and laughed derisively.

‘Really she does, Linda,’ he urged ; ‘and you couldn’t help liking her, she is so awfully pretty and graceful and all that ; and it was so good of her to say she’d come. Oh, my dear girl, my dear Linda, do be a good friend and say yes. Now do !’

‘Why is it good of her to come here?’ asked she fiercely. ‘Do you think I want to be patronised by a pretty, empty, frivolous——’

‘She isn’t frivolous or empty, Linda. She is awfully clever and interesting and original; and you’ll like one another amazingly, I know, if you will only get the idea out of your heads that you’re antagonistic.’

‘Our heads! Then she looks upon me too as an enemy?’

‘Oh, dear me! I’m always saying a stupid thing! No, of course she doesn’t. She knows you are my great friend, my collaborator in fact; and she wants to know you—that’s all. Come, do be reasonable. I want you to do this for me so much.’

Linda did not speak for some minutes; then she said, still with her back to him—

‘Will she stay long?’

‘As long as we make it pleasant for her, I suppose.’

‘When does she want to come?’

‘On Saturday, if you are free.’

‘What will she talk about?’

‘Anything! Everything!’

‘She knows I’m a Socialist?’

‘Well, no. I don’t imagine she does.’

‘She wouldn’t come if she did, I suppose?’

‘Oh yes, she would ; it would interest her very much. She has lived abroad most of her life, and has mixed with all kinds of people. She is quite unlike other English girls of her age.’

‘What is her age?’

‘I don’t know, but I should say somewhere between twenty-five and thirty. Nearer twenty-five, certainly.’

‘Does she dress fashionably?’

‘Well, I don’t know much about fashion. She always wears very suitable colours.’

‘You say “always,” Mark: have you seen her very often? Do you know her well? Do you go to her house? Who is she?’

‘I will answer your questions in order. I have seen her five times, I believe—yes, five. I can’t say I know her *well*, but I feel quite at my ease with her. That’s her charm, her sympathetic nature, I suppose. I have been twice to her house. She is an only child, and her father is one of the under-secretaries at the Foreign Office now. He used to be at Vienna, attached to the British Embassy.’

Linda waited a moment, then she said very slowly and as if pondering a deep subject—

‘And you really imagine that a girl of that class, who has lived all her life amongst Court society—the society you used to, and I certainly still, consider the most corrupt, the most debased, the most immoral, and

the most tyrannical—you imagine that she and I can have any single thing in common, that we shall even know how to talk to one another! Mark, you amaze me; I confess I do not understand you.'

'Don't you, Linda?' he said dolefully—for it looked hopeless for the tea-party. 'I wish I could remove your prejudice against Miss Adair. I am sure you would find plenty to talk about. She is immensely interested in the play, to start with. That would give you a topic of common interest.'

'Your heart is set upon having her here?' asked Linda, looking him full in the face; and he answered quickly, 'Yes—tremendously.'

'All right,' she said briefly; 'I'll come.'

'Thanks! thanks very much indeed,' he said joyously. 'I will write to her at once. She said she would keep Saturday disengaged. You are a trump, Linda!'

She turned brusquely from him and pulled the blind down and up again with a vigorous jerk. When she looked round for him he was gone.

‘If he is going to be a deserter, I may as well be nice to the end,’ she thought to herself with a grim smile; ‘but, oh! my friend, it is hard to lose you—just when it looked as if we were going to do some work together! All for the sake of a society butterfly! Mark descended to that! To have shelved the ideal for a fashionable woman!’ And poor Linda Grey, zealous, earnest, ignorant of the necessary part that love in some shape or other, in some guise however unlooked-for, must play in the process of human development, groaned aloud.

Celia accepted the invitation to tea very graciously, and looked forward to it genuinely, for she was curious to see Linda, about whom Mark spoke so much and yet

so strangely—sometimes as if she were a great deal to him, at other times as if he only half approved of her.

Some instinct told her that a smart gown would be out of place in Anstey Buildings, though she had not the remotest idea what manner of place it was, and it was a slight shock to her when her victoria drove up to the door of a strange, shabby-looking row of houses with small bay-windows and cheap muslin blinds, and here and there on the window-sill a bird-cage or a few dead plants. The footman came back to the carriage with an expression of dismay.

‘If you please, ’m, there ain’t no bell, and I don’t see no porter, and it says “Trespassers will be persecuted” on the houtside of the door.’

‘Dear me!’ said his mistress, ‘how odd! Never mind, James, let me out. I will go up and find the—the people I want.’

With a kind of desperate courage she dived into the building, and found herself confronted by a big, awkward-looking woman with a basket of washing in her arms, while another woman, wearing an unmistakably 'end-of-the-week' apron, was on her knees scrubbing and hearthstoning the stone staircase, having placed a bucket of water just where any one, coming quickly round the corner of the stairs, would knock it over. It required some determination to 'trespass' further; and but for James's contemptuous face, Celia would have gone back and told him to find his way up-stairs and bring Mr. Sergison down to escort her to his rooms. But having once plunged inside that front-door, with its grave warning, she thought it best to struggle up past the washing and the scrubbing. At last, panting and breathless, and with knees trembling with climbing six flights of stairs, she found herself face to face

with No. 14, which she knew was Mark's door. There was no bell, only an iron knocker. 'He might at least have brass!' she thought, and wished again for James. She had never wielded a knocker, as far as she could remember; and she gave a feeble, fumbling kind of knock, like a buyer of bottles, or a tramp on the search for broken victuals.

Linda had resolutely kept aloof ever since she had given her consent to the tea-party, and on Saturday morning she wished with all her heart that she had refused. Some work came for her to do, which would bring her in substantial pay if she could finish it in twenty-four hours; and she grudged an hour—or perhaps longer?—idled away in uncongenial society, for no particular object that she could see, beyond gratifying a whim of Mark's.

She wrote on against time as rapidly as she could, and Mark began to fidget and

feel afraid that at the last moment she would change her mind and not appear. He was particularly anxious that Celia should find her there when she arrived, but he did not like to go and fetch her. He had never known Linda draw back from anything she had once promised to do ; and he tried to pass the time by altering the furniture in the tiny room a dozen times, changing the position of the flowers which he had bought to deck the table, and worrying the unhappy charwoman, whom he had hired for the occasion to open the door and to act the part of a servant, with endless questions about the tea.

At last Linda shut up her machine and looked at the clock.

‘ Half-past four. She is asked for five ; she won’t come punctually—by the time I have washed my hands it will be time enough to go up. Shall I change my dress ?

No, why should I? She must take me as she finds me. I'll change my collar, though, or she'll think we glory in dirt, because we do our own cooking and ironing.' She condescended, therefore, to brush her curly hair and array herself in a clean skirt; and when she arrived in Mark's rooms, panting and flushed from her boyish habit of springing up two steps at a time, he thought with considerable satisfaction that she looked positively handsome.

When she saw the charwoman she frowned.

'What's that for?' she asked.

'I thought we might want more hot water,' he began lamely.

She gave a contemptuous snort.

'Pooh!—it doesn't require a whole woman to keep a kettle boiling!'

'I couldn't hire less,' he said, glad to turn it into a joke.

'Pooh!' said she again, still more em-

phatically ; ‘you surely don’t want to appear as if you kept a regular servant, do you?’

There was such intense scorn in her voice as she asked the question, that he flinched and equivocated.

‘Not exactly ; but Mrs. Hicks happened to be here cleaning up for me, so I kept her—that was all, Linda.’

He felt very humble before her : he knew her pet aversion was the domestic servant ; it was one of her notions that the type should never have existed.

They tried to talk amicably for the remainder of the time that elapsed before Celia’s arrival ; but Mark’s head was perpetually thrust out of the window to see if there were any signs of her coming, and Linda grew impatient and cross at having to give up so much of her valuable time.

At last the timid little knock was heard at the door, and Mark, oblivious of his

former resolve to make Mrs. Hicks open it and usher Miss Adair in correct style, flew to do it himself.

‘Oh, what a relief! I was so afraid I might have mistaken the number and come to the wrong door! Oh, what a long way up it is! Why don’t you have a porter, and a lift, and a bell?’

Celia gasped out all her sentences one after the other, and as Linda heard her she bristled with scorn and derision.

Still more so when she heard Mark’s answer.

‘It is most awfully good of you to come here, Miss Adair. I’m so sorry we haven’t a lift; it is a terribly long way up. Do come in and rest—you must be quite exhausted, I’m sure. This is the way; very tiny, you see—I prepared you for it, didn’t I?’

There was a swish and a flutter and a rustling of silk-lined skirts, and Celia entered

the room where Linda was standing in her most defiant attitude, her arms behind her, her head thrown back, and quite the last kind of person Celia had expected to see.

Mark pressed in close after Celia and hastened to introduce the two women.

Celia looked uncertain whether she dared offer to shake hands ; but as Linda kept hers behind her and only bowed jerkily like a schoolboy, she took the hint and merely inclined her head gracefully, smiling as she said—

‘Miss Grey? I am so glad to have the pleasure of meeting you.’

Inwardly, though horrified at Linda’s *gauche* appearance, she was relieved to find her utterly unformidable as a rival. She had pictured to herself this highly praised unknown girl as undoubtedly second-rate, but withal taking, with perhaps a witchery about her very commonness and

a piquancy in her unconventionality. But this! this boy in petticoats, with short hair, straight, lank figure, and skimpy cloth skirts! Mr. Sergison really should have prepared her for the surprise.

She turned to Mark and began to make effusive remarks about everything she saw—partly to put him at his ease, and partly to annoy Linda, who she saw would resent any sort of compliment or soft speech.

‘It’s very good of you to find anything to admire, Miss Adair,’ he said gratefully, and wishing Linda would remember that she was to do the honours of the tea-table, and change that ungainly attitude.

‘You are ready for tea, I’m sure,’ he said. ‘Linda, will you make it?—the water does boil.’

Linda gave a start and sat down on the edge of a chair to pour out the tea. She felt she could not utter a syllable with this

dressed-up doll in front of her ; for in Celia she could see nothing but the personification of all that she most detested and despised in woman : frizzed hair, feathered hat, veiled face, a dressmaker's figure, and a silk skirt ; and, worst of all, a voice trained to what is called ' well-bred ' society, neither loud nor soft, high nor low—monotonous, deliberate, and artificial.

Mark felt desperately uncomfortable ; he saw he had made an egregious mistake in asking these two to meet ; he had no idea they would be so instinctively antagonistic. He hoped that Celia with her ready tact and worldly wisdom would have instantly conciliated and won over Linda, who on her side, he thought, could not have resisted so much beauty and charm of manner. And he became more and more nervous every minute. Celia ignored Linda, who sat stern and silent, neither eating nor drinking her-

self, and looking unutterably bored and disgusted.

‘How could he bring her to see me!’ she was thinking.

‘How could he bring me to see her!’ Celia was saying to herself.

At last Celia addressed a direct remark to her.

‘I do think it so clever of you to have done so much to Mr. Sergison’s play!’ she said in a tone that was not intended to be patronising, but which Linda took as such, and she answered resentfully—

‘I hardly did anything; he exaggerates my share in it.’

‘Ah! you are modest!’ persisted Celia.

‘I’m not; I’m honest,’ said Linda.

‘Oh, Linda! you know——’ began Mark, when Celia interrupted him—

‘Oh, clever people always disclaim talent, Mr. Sergison. Now, do show me that illus-

trated copy of the *Omar Khayyàm* that you promised I should see. I mustn't keep my cobs long—they were out this morning; and I had no idea that you lived so far away from the haunts of civilisation.'

For the next quarter of an hour they looked at books and talked gaily, while Linda listened with increased bitterness at Mark's declension from what she considered the pinnacle of greatness. He seemed to hold Celia in a kind of reverential awe, which was wholly inexplicable to her, receiving every remark she made as if it were the words of an Hypatia or a Minerva; while to Linda they sounded like the inane chatter of an artificial brain. What strange infatuation had taken possession of him? Verily, Fate could blindfold her victims!

Before Celia took her departure she made one more final attempt at conciliating 'the she-boy,' as in her mind she called Linda.

‘I’m afraid it is no use asking you to come and see me,’ she said with her sweetest smile, and holding out her perfectly gloved little hand. ‘If Mr. Sergison could prevail on you to come one day and would bring you himself, I should be so pleased,’ she added.

‘Oh, I never go out,’ said Linda gruffly, holding out her hand in her stiffest manner, and wondering how Mark could respect any woman who wore gloves on her hands that cost as much as would buy bread enough to last a family for a week.

‘Isn’t that a pity, don’t you think?’ said Celia; ‘wouldn’t you do better work if you went a little amongst people? You must want recreation sometimes.’

‘It would be none to me to go amongst people I’—despise, she wanted to say, but for Mark’s sake she hesitated, and said awkwardly—‘I have nothing in common with.’

‘But we are not so very different,’ urged Celia more gently, for when she came to look at this curious girl she saw that she would be really handsome if she did not look so hard.

‘I think we are,’ Linda said stubbornly, refusing to be mollified.

‘I told Linda you would understand and sympathise with many of her ideas,’ Mark chimed in, eager to promote a friendly spirit.

‘Yes, indeed,’ said Celia.

But Linda remained silent.

She could not argue the point of difference. They were simply of two separate worlds—that was all; and worlds between which no bridge existed to span the yawning gulf.

‘Good-bye,’ she said briefly, as if to put an end to the conversation; and Celia felt dismissed.

She let her fingers rest for a second in

Linda's, and then, turning swiftly to Mark, she said in a tone which to him sounded almost sharp—

‘It’s no use; Miss Grey won’t be persuaded that one can be in a world and not of it. Good-bye, Mr. Sergison; come and see me again soon;’ and then, rustling and fluttering, away she went, Mark escorting her to the carriage, and remaining so long down-stairs with her that Linda made her escape before he returned. He on his part was so annoyed and disgusted with the result of his tea-party that he left her alone, and was more than ever persuaded that of the two types of womanhood Celia’s was the highest—because the most loveable.

CHAPTER VI

‘L’expérience des uns ne sert qu’à leur faire donner aux autres des conseils inutiles.’—COMTESSE DIANE.

IT was a very hot day, and most people found it too great an exertion even to amuse themselves. Celia was accustomed, however, to hot weather, and scarcely varied her habits; no matter how fierce the sun was, she rode every morning in the Row, and came home to lie down and rest before attacking the later engagements of her day. She always kept to her foreign custom of a midday *déjeuner*, which saved her from lunch-parties and enabled her to rest during the hour between one and two o’clock which all London devotes to feeding.

She had just come in from the Park,

and was feeling remarkably languid and unfit for three teas, a dinner, and five 'at homes' that were on her list of that day's engagements, when the servant brought her a telegram as follows—

'Can I see you four o'clock to-day?—Alec.'

Celia knit her brows. Four o'clock on a Friday, Alec's mail and busiest day! What could have happened? She ought to go to those tea-parties. He would probably be at two of the five 'at homes' in the evening: what could he want so very specially? Out of sheer curiosity she sent him an answer, 'Yes.—Celia,' and then threw herself on to her bed and fell fast asleep for an hour and a half. At ten minutes past four Alec appeared. Celia was dressed in a wonderful tea-gown of pale pink material which became her marvellously, and made her look refreshingly cool on this hot afternoon.

A low table was drawn up beside her,

on which was placed iced coffee and biscuits of Viennese baking; Alec Watson was distinctly a favoured individual to be received in this cosy, intimate fashion by one of the prettiest women in London.

He was evidently perturbed, by the way in which he entered the room.

‘It’s blazing hot outside! how jolly and cool you are in here,’ was his first remark, and Celia noticed that he was nervous and ill at ease. Had some woman been proposing to him, and had he been caught at last?

‘Have some iced coffee,’ she said quietly; ‘it will cool you. Has the Bank of England gone smash? or is your grandfather dead?’

‘No, no—neither—nothing of that sort; it isn’t business that has upset me—it’s pleasure, confound it!’

‘It is what I thought!’ said Celia to herself. Aloud she remarked—

‘Pleasure has a trick of confounding itself with business, hasn’t it? Go on. I’ve put off three teas to hear you, so make yourself comfortable and begin. Which one is it?’

‘Which what? Oh, you are not quite on the right tack. I’m in a muddle, and I want your advice—that’s all.’

‘Well, I’m ready to give it; go on. Only, don’t crumble up the biscuits if you don’t want to eat them, because I’m trying to economise just now, and these cost six shillings a pound.’

‘I beg your pardon; I wasn’t thinking of the biscuits. Celia, you remember my telling you I was fool enough to go to that Richmond ball with the Crosland woman, don’t you?’

‘Yes; well?’

‘Well!—it wasn’t well at all!’

‘There’s been a row at home about it?’

I thought you said they didn't know. You told me you said you had gone somewhere else—I forget where.'

'That's just it; and now they know I didn't.'

'Oho! some one saw you, I suppose, and told your aunt. Well, surely that wasn't so upsetting. Aren't you really equal to that amount of invention?'

'You aren't a bit sympathetic; and I'm so upset. You don't see the situation at all.'

'How can I, till you explain it?'

'It's this way. A horrible old woman, who knows my aunt only ever so slightly, chanced by all that's diabolical to be at that ball. I saw her, but steered clear of her, and I hoped she didn't recognise me. But of course she did, and you know what Judy Crosland is like, don't you?'

Celia turned up her nose and said curtly—

'Oh, dear, yes!'

‘ Yes—you don’t like her, I know—women don’t ; but she is very handsome, you must own—at any rate, she’s considered so. And of course this old woman must needs be her cousin or aunt or something ; and she being one of that sort that puts two and two together and makes five of it, comes up to Portland Square and calls on Aunt Caroline, and, as bad luck would have it, it is our “at home” day, so of course she is admitted. I didn’t recognise her in a bonnet and veil, and I brought her an ice in my sweet innocence, thinking she was just one of the stock frumps that my aunt had to be civil to ; when she put up her eyeglass, and said in her horrid squeaking voice, “Oh, Mr. Watson, why didn’t you come and speak to me the other night ? I didn’t know you were such a friend of Julia Crosland’s. We know how to give good balls at Richmond, don’t we ?” My aunt

was standing by and heard every word, and she looked calmly at me and said, "Were you at a Richmond ball, Alec? When?" I mumbled out something about having told her, and she'd forgotten; but as soon as I could I escaped into the boudoir and made violent love to Isabel Harper.'

'Isabel Harper! the girl who bores you so!'

'Yes, she bores me; but I couldn't stand any more sudden shocks under my aunt's searching eye. This was the day before yesterday, Celia. I dined out that night and last night; but to-night I have to take my aunt to a party, and to-morrow my grandfather comes back, and there will be a deuce of a row if he thinks I'm carrying on with Judy Crosland. What am I to do? Make a clean breast of it to my aunt, and ask her to keep her own counsel? or say nothing and brazen it out?'

‘That all depends on how far you’ve gone with the Crosland woman, and what you intend to do in future.’

‘Oh, that’s not the point at all. Of course I don’t intend anything serious ; it is she who is quite absurd over me—writes me three letters a day, sends me her photographs, panel size by Mendelssohn, and now offers to give me a pastel of herself by that new French artist. That’s not the point at all. Ought I to tell my people or not ? What should you do under the circumstances ?’

‘*I* should never manage my affairs as badly as that. To begin with, I should never attempt to live two lives as you do. You’re a born flirt, and you’re never happy unless you’re in some woman’s pocket. How much that woman cares for you you don’t mind ; you only want to amuse yourself and to get all you can for nothing. And yet you want to appear invulnerable ; you

want your people to think you immaculate. Other men may get talked about, but Alec Watson—never! Like all other Englishmen of your type, you are to be allowed to bury your ostrich head in the sand, and no one is ever to see your big body sticking out large as life.'

'If I knew you were going to be disagreeable, I wouldn't have come; I thought you'd understand and be sympathetic.'

'Oh, I understand well enough. You want me to tell you how you can drop Judy Crosland and yet keep a hold over her.'

'No, I don't; I don't want you to bother about Judy. I only want you to tell me what I'm to do as regards my grandfather. You know he hates young widows, and a Mexican settler's widow would scare him to death; and if he knew that I—well, you know she lives at Richmond, and—ahem!—

I was supposed, you see, to be in Warwickshire.'

'Oh, you unutterable idiot! You really are too childish over your love-affairs.'

'This isn't a love-affair—not on my side, anyway.'

'Judy thinks it is.'

'No, she doesn't—'pon my soul, she doesn't. She bores me, too. I can stand a few hours of her, but more bores me dreadfully: she is so stupid in some ways. And yet I don't want to give her away to my people, and to let them think she makes all the running.'

'With such an admirable ancestor as Adam, I should not have qualms on that score, Alec! From Eve downwards it has always been the woman's lot to be "given away," as you call it. You are chivalrous creatures, you men! upon my word, you are!'

Celia leant back against her cushions and looked scorn personified.

Alec fidgeted about on his chair and played with a teaspoon.

‘Still you don’t help me; abuse isn’t advice. I declare I wish I could cut and run; I’d like to travel for a year and let all my affairs slide. If only you were a man, you might come too; we’d go to Australia and New Zealand and Japan. What a pity you’re not a man!’

‘Might as well say it’s a pity I’m not a cow or an elephant.’

‘No, no! And yet some people think we’ve been animals once—do you?’

‘That’s rather a good idea. Yes, now you mention it, you are remarkably like some animal.’

‘What? Not a monkey, I hope?’

‘No; a large white bird with a long yellow bill and funny yellow feet.’

‘Celia, you’re horrid ! Well, I suppose your life would be dull if you hadn’t some one to laugh at.’

‘Oh, you are not a unique specimen, I assure you. But to resume the subject of your travels. Why don’t you ask your grandfather straight out for a cheque to go round the world with ? Ask him to cut it out of what he is going to leave you. Nothing like taking it for granted he is going to leave you some money ; and I suppose he will, anyhow, do that ? ’

‘ I don’t know ; I expect he will leave it all to Aunt Caroline. You see, he expects me to work and save my own income ; and if he thought I was presuming upon his leaving me a fortune, and was idle meanwhile, he’d be in an awful rage. Besides, I don’t want to go away much—not alone, at least. I suppose you wouldn’t come—as you are ? ’

‘As I am? in this tea-gown, do you mean? My dear boy, you’ve had a touch of the sun on your way here. You shouldn’t venture out so early; you——’

‘Don’t chaff me; I’m not in a mood for it—this has upset me so. I was going to say about next Sunday—I’m afraid after what has happened——’

Celia was to have gone on the river with him, and she instantly divined that he was going to get out of it.

‘Oh, by the way, yes, about Sunday? she said quickly. ‘I was just going to write to you and tell you I couldn’t come on the river, because Mark Sergison is coming to rehearse the duologue he has written for us to act at Lady Banker’s *café chantant* next week.’

Alec’s eyes opened very wide.

‘For you to act? you and he?—impossible!—never!’

‘Why not, pray?’ asked Celia coolly.

‘Why? — why? — for a dozen reasons! Think how London will talk!’

‘Will it, indeed? Its collective tongue does that pretty well already, I think. It can’t hurt to wag a little more than usual.’

‘But why should you be the subject of its wagging?—you, of all people, and with him, of all men!’

‘Why him, of all men? Why are you so vehement always against that unfortunate celebrity?’

‘Celebrity! Heavens! a man who has a mushroom reputation, whom no one has ever heard of before a week or two ago, who apparently belongs to no club, and whom no decent man seems to know—why, nobody even knows where the fellow lives!’

‘I do,’ said Celia, laughing, and touching her knees expressively; ‘my poor knees won’t forget it!’

‘What do you mean, Celia? your knees?’

‘Yes; don’t look so absurdly shocked. Don’t stairs, steep stone ones, and lots of them, make your knees shake and tremble?’

‘But what’s that to do with Sergison? You don’t mean to imply——’

‘I never imply anything, you stupid person. I tell you straight out I know where Mr. Sergison lives, because I’ve been to see him in his own place.’

‘Been to see Sergison! You? Great Scot! what will you do next? In his own rooms! Did you go in broad daylight, may I ask?’

‘Well, that’s a nice question! Am I likely to go at any other time, Alec? What is there so extraordinary in my paying the man an afternoon call? I went to tea with him last Saturday, and all London may know it if it likes.’

‘All London does probably know by this

time. You went in your victoria, I suppose, and left your servants outside——’

‘As I couldn’t drive the carriage up Mr. Sergison’s stairs, and it would have been difficult to have taken James and the coachman in without the carriage, you see I had no choice but to leave them all outside. It’s news to me that one isn’t supposed to do that when one pays a visit in London. Heigho! one lives and learns!’

‘You really are dreadfully provoking, Celia. You know quite well that I am intensely serious over this, and you will chaff about it.’

‘It’s so silly——’

‘Yes, you may think so; but you don’t know how ill-natured people are.’

‘Oh, but I do! I have had experience ——’

‘Then why do you do such rash, risky things?’

‘ I see no risk.’

‘ That’s more hopeless still ! Why, do you know that if you were a married woman it would be enough to get you a divorce for you to go and see a man alone in his rooms ! There !—just fancy ! and you see no risk !’

‘ I only see an additional reason for being thankful I’m not a married woman—that’s all. I always have heard that English husbands take every advantage to get rid of their wives, and you confirm this idea.’

‘ But, Celia, do think for a moment. You must see that you are giving people good occasion to gossip if you do such things. Think if your carriage was seen outside Sergison’s door !’

‘ He doesn’t have signposts and placards and brass plates to indicate his door. Besides, you said just now that nobody knew where he lived.’

‘ Probably not ; but anybody could find out

that it was his door, and they would immediately jump to the conclusion that—oh, goodness! I can't conceive why you are so blind and rash. Besides, you don't know that the man won't take advantage of you. Oh, it's horrible, the things you give him the power of saying and doing!'

'Look here, Alec,' said Celia, sitting straight up and speaking very decidedly, 'you can rap out as many of your Grundyisms as you like, but when it comes to slandering one of my friends I won't have it. Mr. Sergison is as much of a gentleman as—as—you are, perhaps, and I know when a man is to be trusted. I went to see some books of his, and to meet the girl who has written the play with him. I wasn't half-an-hour in the place altogether; and if all the correct old gossips in London had seen me going in or coming out, I shouldn't have cared. But when you hint at Mr Sergison's behaving

like a cad about it, you make me absolutely wild ; so change the subject, please. *You* are willing enough to make a woman conspicuous if it answers you. What about taking me on the river?—is that less “ risky ” and “ rash ” ? If so, why, pray ? ’

‘ Well, I was going to say that out of pure consideration for you I had thought we had better not go ; but, any way, the river isn’t a private house, and—well, I ’m not Sergison. Every one knows all about me, and he’s unknown—except, of course, as an author. ’

‘ It’s no use your attempting to explain your London distinctions, Alec, for they are as abstruse and quibbling as the Athanasian Creed. Boiled down, they appear to me to consist in this maxim, “ Blessed are the impure in heart, for they shall run no risk. ” ’

Alec crossed one knee over the other and clasped his hands behind his head.

‘ It’s all very pretty to talk about purity

and innocence, Celia, and it would be very nice and idyllic if one could transform London into Arcadia ; but you know as well as I do that modern civilisation has made all that purity rubbish impossible. You surely haven't lived all these years at foreign courts with your eyes shut ? Why, you are one of the shrewdest women of the world, for your age, I ever came across ! Why do you suddenly play the part of an *ingénue* who has never heard of Mrs. Grundy ?—that's the puzzle to me.'

'It's because I know the world, as you call it, of Mrs. Grundy so well that I am sick of it. I want to make a different world. I want to claim the right to be natural and spontaneous without being eternally thought "fast" ; and if half-a-dozen society women would do the same, we might reform Society, and even convert Mrs. Grundy herself.'

'Oh, that is the most rotten theory you

could possibly hold. It's been tried over and over again, and people only believe all the more that you are either an impropriety or a lunatic let loose. To begin with, you aren't old enough or ugly enough to be a reformer. It takes a woman of mature age, my dear Celia, of large feet and a strong countenance, not to say repellent features, to organise a mission to Mrs. Grundy. As you are, and in that thing,' touching her pretty, artistic draperies significantly, 'you might as well talk about dredging the Thames of all its mud.'

Celia shook her head.

'Mr. Sergison doesn't agree with you; he is ever so much more encouraging to talk to. He has splendid ideas about woman's influence on Society. He is tremendously in earnest.'

'Splendid fiddlesticks!' ejaculated Alec. 'You don't see through the man; he flatters

you because you're useful to him—you are the highest rung in the social ladder that he wants to climb. Oh, I don't blame him for his tactics; only, Humpty-Dumpty had a great fall once, you know; and—well, I needn't quote the rest.'

'You are the most——'

Whatever Celia was going to say was checked by the sudden entrance of the servant announcing—

'Miss Isabel Harper.'

Alec jumped up and uttered a very unparliamentary word under his breath.

Miss Harper was his partner's daughter, and he was not supposed to be out of the office so early, neither did he care about having it gossiped about that he was found *tête-à-tête* with Miss Adair when he was professedly in the City.

'My dear Celia, this is luck to find you in,' said Miss Harper effusively. 'How

do you do, Mr. Watson? I didn't know you ever got away from business so early—I thought Friday was such a busy day?'

'So it is, Miss Harper,' answered he, giving her the most up-to-date shake of her finger-tips, somewhere on the level with her eyebrows, and smiling blandly; 'only, I had business with Miss Adair to-day which obliged me to leave the City early. I won't stay, now, any longer. You've still not told me what I am to do!' he added, turning to Celia, and putting into his eyes a whole volume of annoyance and discomfiture at being caught.

'Oh, take a leaf out of "the Celebrity's" book and be a man for once,' she replied, giving him a limp hand and laughing rather sarcastically.

He understood that she meant he was to be as outspoken as Sergison and not to

parry his aunt's questions, and it displeased him to be thus dismissed.

'Thanks,' he said curtly; 'I'm sorry I've trespassed so long on your time. We shall meet at the Wendovers' later on, probably.'

'Probably,' said Celia, bending over the tea-table, and not vouchsafing to look again at him. 'Sit down, Isabel.'

'Oh, don't let me drive you away, Mr. Watson,' said the girl eagerly; 'I've only come for a second—I can't stop, Celia.'

But she had already most effectively driven away the other visitor, who had run down the stairs, very nearly slamming the front door after him.

'Sit down and have some coffee,' repeated Celia in a calm voice, handing a cup to her guest.

'Thanks; I've had three cups of something or other already. I expected to have met you at the Browns' and the Bakers'

and the Philips', and I've only rushed in now with a message from mamma to ask you if you'll be a perfect angel and come and fill up a place to-morrow night? Count von Eyslinga is coming; he shall sit next you. Do come—do, there's a dear!'

'I can't possibly; we are dining with the Bentleys. I don't like Count von Eyslinga, either.'

Celia spoke rather shortly, and Isabel felt uncomfortable.

'I'm so sorry; and I wish I hadn't interrupted you and Mr. Watson. I hadn't an idea, of course, that he was here; he always says he can't get away before six.'

'He had something special to say; he had finished—you didn't drive him away,' Celia answered indifferently.

Isabel looked keenly at her, and then said—

‘Did he come to tell you of his engagement?’

‘No—is it a fact?’ Celia said in a bored voice.

‘Oh, I don’t know—of course, if you don’t, it probably isn’t.’

‘Why should I know? I don’t keep Mr. Watson in my pocket, Isabel.’

‘N—no—of course not; but—he’s very intimate with you—everybody knows that.’

‘Everybody is so wise!’ said Celia, with a curl of her lip. ‘And to whom does everybody say he is engaged?’

‘Celia! you don’t mean to pretend you haven’t heard the gossip about Alec Watson and Elsa Kronstadt? Why, he actually went down to Brighton with her last Saturday!’

‘How do you know? did you travel down with them?’ said Celia, knowing that the

story was untrue, and out of curiosity wishing to get to the bottom of it.

‘No, I didn’t; but my cousin, Ada Harper, did.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes—well—not exactly that; but she was at Victoria waiting for her boy to arrive from Eastbourne, and she saw Mr. Watson take two second-class tickets—I suppose he took second to avoid being seen—and then meet Elsa Kronstadt at the bookstall and buy her a *Lady’s Pictorial*; and Ada said he called her by her Christian name.’

‘Of course, that’s all quite enough to prove your story, Isabel. By the way, in England is a man hanged on circumstantial evidence? or must one have absolute proof of his guilt? I forget English customs, you see.’

Isabel looked bewildered. ‘What has that to do with what I was telling you?’ she said.

‘Only this, that I thought one usually hangs a dog that has gained a bad name. I may as well tell you—and you can tell your cousin, who would make a very clever detective, I think—that Mr. Watson was with my father and me at the Academy from four till six last Saturday, and that if he was at Brighton also he is cleverer than I imagined.’

‘Oh!’ said Isabel, rather crestfallen. ‘But all the same, he does run after that girl, doesn’t he? I think he’s an awful flirt; don’t you, Celia?’

‘Is he? I don’t know, and I don’t care either; let’s talk of something else.’

‘I thought you and he were such devoted friends!’

‘*Devoted?* what an English expression!’

‘Yes; I believe you are the reason why he doesn’t marry.’

Celia threw up her chin and laughed.

‘My poor Isabel, you are absurdly off the line about Mr. Watson. Neither I nor any other woman prevents him from committing the ridiculous folly of marrying.’

‘Folly? why? because he isn’t rich, do you mean? Papa says his grandfather will leave him all his money. Do you know, Celia, papa says, too, that the old man is secretly very anxious for Mr. Watson to marry so as to carry on his family name. Why do you think he remains unmarried? I’m sure you know.’

‘I only know that he’s much—ever so much too selfish to marry. A man has to give up something when he marries. Alec Watson would never do that. Fancy! he might actually have to get up at night and walk about with the baby! My dear Isabel, you surely have very little sense of the fitness of things if you can picture to yourself that tableau!’

Isabel opened her eyes rather wide. Marriage was associated in her mind wholly with white satin and wedding-cake and presents; the disastrous consequences had not struck her as possible.

‘Oh!’ she gasped, ‘I didn’t think of all that. But surely,’ she added more hopefully, ‘if a man were in love with a girl he would never look forward to—to that sort of horrible thing; he would only think how nice it would be to be always jolly—always together—I mean the romance of it would be all that he would see at first.’

Again Celia laughed, this time almost harshly; at least so Isabel thought.

‘My dear girl, how on earth you English girls manage to get hold of any ideas of romance, I can’t think. I should have thought your London men would have knocked them all out of you.’

‘How are London men so different from

other men? I'm sure foreigners don't look half so romantic as lots of Englishmen I know.'

'I wish you'd show them to me. They are the most deadly, cut-and-dried creations I ever came across.'

'But you can't judge, Celia; you've been here such a short time.'

'This is my second season; long enough, I assure you, to give me a very good notion of the live Londoner with his got-up style and elaborate morals.'

'Elaborate! how? Nobody is very moral nowadays; it isn't *chic*.'

'Oh, yes, my dear, the London man is intensely moral—on the surface. He is never caught. He does things that would stagger a Frenchman and horrify a Russian, but—he is never caught. Foreigners, as you call them, are not particular about breaking the commandments, but they have the pluck

and courage to do it openly and to stand by their actions. I shouldn't care what a man was nor what he did so long as he wasn't ashamed of doing it; but to do a thing you're ashamed of is to me the lowest depth of meanness, and that's why I despise London men from the bottom of my heart.'

Isabel looked grave; all this was beyond her depth. She knew nothing of other nations, and to her London-bred mind the men she met every day were of the correct pattern. That they did vague 'things' she knew; but she supposed that that was part and parcel of their manhood, and that when she was a married woman she would be instructed in these 'things.' It made her uncomfortable and worried to hear Celia talk like this, and she got up to say good-bye.

'I believe Mr. Watson has been rude to you this afternoon, Celia!' she said, half-

joking and half-afraid her remark might offend.

‘Rude? Oh, dear me! that would be giving him credit for more originality than he possesses. His manners are irreproachable always, aren’t they?’

‘Well, I don’t know. He was rather rude to me the other afternoon at his aunt’s.’

‘Was he? do tell me.’

‘He really was. I don’t think he likes me; do you think so?’

‘I’m sure he does—immensely.’

‘Did he ever say so?’ Isabel’s eyes sparkled, for to her Alec Watson was a demi-god.

‘Of course he does—often.’

‘Well, he did certainly talk to me quite a long time the other afternoon, but he rather spoilt it afterwards by saying he only did so because he wanted to escape the old women in the front drawing-room.’

‘I ’m sure that wasn’t true! Must you go? Well, we shall meet at those abominable parties to-night; tell Mrs. Harper I ’m sorry I ’m engaged.’

Isabel trailed out, and when she had gone Celia clasped her arms wearily behind her head and began pacing up and down the room.

‘Thank Heaven she ’s gone! Oh, the weary boredom of it all! How sick I am of these machine-made people, all pattering out their platitudes, and so sublimely content with themselves and each other! And Alec, too! Oh, what a fool—a frightful, idiotic fool—I am, to care one straw about him or what he does or what people say he does! Celia Alexandrina Penelope Adair, you ought to be ashamed of yourself and punished for giving two thoughts to a man who isn’t a man—who is only a mechanical contrivance for making people miserable, with his selfish,

egotistical, calculating head, and his cold, unreal heart. Alec! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!’

That night about twelve o'clock, as Celia and her father were struggling up the crowded staircase of one of the most fashionable houses in Belgravia, they met Alec Watson, looking very cross and hot and almost untidy as he pushed his way down the stairs again.

‘I gave you up!’ he said across the skinny shoulders of a very *décolletée* marchioness, who had nearly completed her fifty-third season, and was resigned to the exhibition of her bones.

Celia scarcely deigned to reply, and turned her head to address a remark to her father.

‘I’ll wait down-stairs if you won’t be long,’ he added, gasping for breath, as he was hustled along by a huge Cabinet Minister elbowing his way down-stairs.

‘We shall be here some time,’ she answered, looking over his head.

He tried to think what could have annoyed her, and gave it up. He got tired of waiting about amongst coats and waiters and a general hat scrimmage in the hall; and next morning Celia received a little note from him as follows :

‘DEAR FRÄULEIN CONFESSORIN,—It’s all right ; my aunt only said as we got to our dinner-party to-night : “ Better not let your grandfather hear your name coupled with Mrs. Crosland’s.” So I knew she didn’t mean to tell him, and she never asked any questions. Isn’t she a brick ? I call her stunning. What a nuisance that Harper girl was ! When may I come again ? Don’t let these late hours knock you up ; you looked tired last night, fairest lady. Do you want a prompter for your duologue ? If so, at your entire service is—Yours ever, ALEC.’

To which he received this reply :

‘DEAR ALEC,—I congratulate Mrs. Crosland on your aunt’s discretion. Thanks : I hope not

to require a prompter. I will pass on your kind offer to Mr. Sergison.—Yours ever, CELIA.'

This note reached Alec's office in the middle of the day, and his temper was so short directly afterwards that his partner screwed up his shrewd little eyes and said to himself—

'Midday posts are disturbing influences ; one of Watson's young women cut up rough last night, evidently !'

Which was quite as near the mark as a middle-aged father of a family could be expected to hit.

CHAPTER VII

‘ June rear’d that bunch of flowers you carry
From seeds of April sowing.
I plant a heartful now ; some seed
At least is sure to strike
And yield—what you’ll not pluck indeed :
Not love, but maybe like.’

R. BROWNING, *Pippa Passes*.

CELIA’S visit to Anstey Buildings had marked an epoch in Sergison’s life. For days afterwards he fancied his rooms held a faint perfume which recalled her personality, and he found himself constantly calling up her every look and trick of manner to his mind.

He was beginning to acknowledge to himself that he was genuinely and deeply in love with her. He had not yet quite arrived at the crucial point which is a man’s only test of whether he really desires a

woman for a wife or for a mere whim—when he asks himself the question, ‘Can I live without her?’ Rather was he at the stage which a woman usually considers her final point, when she asks herself, ‘Can I live *with* him?’—a distinction which is significant of the sex difference. At present Mark was merely conscious of a supreme desire to be always near this woman: her very presence exhilarated him and her charm intoxicated him. He felt her to be a new inspiration to him, while Linda had never been more than an appreciative recipient of his inspirations.

In his present position he was, however, unable seriously to contemplate marriage. His income was barely two hundred and fifty pounds a year, and he could scarcely count upon making as large a profit every year as he had done this spring out of his dramatic work. He was incapable, too, of

marrying for money, and the question as to whether Celia had an independent fortune never once occurred to him. He recognised, nevertheless, the necessity of being possessed of a sufficiently large income to enable him to offer his wife a position worthy of her—that wife being always understood to be Celia. Had he contemplated marrying Linda, or one of the members of the ‘Spade Club,’ he would have held very different views; and possibly nothing showed so much the distance he had paced from his former ideals of conduct than this hesitation he felt towards putting into practice his cherished theory of the indubitable right of every individual to enjoy the privileges of marriage and parentage. A few months ago he would have scorned to hold fellowship with a man who preached the doctrine of prudence and self-restraint purely on the grounds of inadequacy of income. But

whenever he thought of marriage it meant Celia ; and her image conjured up a picture of such ultra-refinement and even luxury as a necessary adjunct to his marriage, that he could not but accept the one as indispensable to the other. For, to ask Celia to come and live in Anstey Buildings, to dust her own chairs, to mend her own garments, ay ! and to wear such homely, inexpensive ones, too, as were becoming to an ' Anstey Dweller,' would be indeed to prove himself a fatuous fool.

No ! She was a rare gem, and one which required the most costly setting. Whether, when he had purchased the appropriate setting, the gem would condescend to be set therein, remained in his mind as a torturing doubt ; and the further from his grasp it seemed to be, the more desirable did it appear to him.

He felt intuitively that Linda would not

enter into, even if she did not actively despise, his present frame of mind. He seldom sought her society, and she felt his estrangement keenly. He had completely lost his poise, she thought; and she endeavoured to busy herself in work, so as to render herself oblivious to this new trial—for trial it undoubtedly was. She had had no experience of the moods of a man, and her inexperience naturally made her intolerant. It is only those who have lived that can let live.

To her he was simply a trifler, an unworthy laggard in the march towards Liberty and Freedom—words of which, though she wrote them with big capitals, she had not yet begun to take in the full meaning; for she did not understand that no man can call himself free who has not mastered the latent forces of his own nature, nor could she see that in yielding to a natural human passion he was being put to the greatest of all tests,

and one which would prove whether he was truly man or merely brute. When she was older she might philosophise ; at this stage she could only deplore.

The idea of the duologue which Celia had announced to Alec her intention of acting with Mark arose in this way.

He had called upon her one afternoon on the vague chance of finding her at home, and had been fortunate enough to be admitted. She was in a low, deep arm-chair in a cool and darkened room, and had evidently been reading. He came forward eagerly to her, and the book she had on her lap slipped on to the floor as she half rose to greet him.

He picked it up and looked at it. It was a volume of Swinburne, and he involuntarily made a disapproving grimace at her choice of a poet.

‘Don’t look like that,’ she said quickly.

‘I am not fond of poetry as a rule, but Swinburne is the only poet I can understand.’

‘Oh, Miss Adair! that is surely because you have read no other,’ he urged; for Swinburne, although fairly sound as a politician, was, he thought, unwholesome as an emotionalist.

‘I can’t read anybody else—that’s the fact,’ she said. ‘Tennyson is an old bore; Shelley, Wordsworth, Keats, all of them are so much rubbish to me; but I love the long, swinging lines, the rhythm of Swinburne, and some of his things are tremendously powerful and dramatic.’

‘I really can’t say I have read much of his; but I don’t remember anything that ever touched me, or made me feel that he was stirred with the fire of genius.’

‘I think if you were to read his poems carefully you would like them very much;

but then you've a cold, unemotional nature, perhaps?'

'I do not think so—not altogether.'

'No! Well, I don't know; I should have said you were—or at least that you would think it undignified to give vent to your feelings in Swinburne's tempestuous way.'

'I—I—don't think I should; not exactly.'

'What, then? You would be unable to express yourself so warmly?'

'No—oh, no; my antipathy to Swinburne is really indefinable. What were you reading when I disturbed you?'

'At the exact moment when you came in, do you mean? or before?'

'Both—either.'

He took up the book and began turning it over.

'Before you came I had been reading "A Song in time of Revolution." Just as you came in I was reading a little short poem,

“Stage Love”—you’ll find it near the beginning.’

He turned to the index in his methodical fashion, and she noticed in it a characteristic action.

He found the page, but his eye was arrested by a poem on the next one, and Celia, glancing at it, exclaimed—

‘Oh, that is a horrible poem you are reading—quite loathsome; of course, you won’t like that. “The Leper:” I hate it; theme and treatment are equally disgusting.’

He was intensely struck by what he had found, and paid no heed to her words. He had never read the poem, and it absorbed him. He read it through from beginning to end; and when he had finished and he looked up, the tears were standing in his eyes.

‘I recall all that I ever said in dispraise of Swinburne,’ he said in a low voice, and

she was fairly startled at the expression in his face.

‘Do you really think that a wonderful poem, then?’ she said wonderingly. ‘I have always thought it perfectly horrid—it made my flesh creep. To think of the poor, unfortunate woman losing her humanity in that loathsome leprosy! And what an awful fate to be put away to die like that!’

‘But what a glory for that scribe to serve her in so sublime a way! Good heavens! what a privilege! what a privilege!’

He spoke absently, his eyes fixed upon Celia’s fair hand, and thinking what bliss it would be to him to do her a service such as rarely falls to the lot of man to perform for love.

‘It is rather romantic, isn’t it?’ she said with a little short laugh; ‘it might almost make a theme for a play if it weren’t so ghastly and so tragic.’

He was silent for some minutes, and Celia began to wish he would wake up and forget the leper lady.

‘You are right,’ he said suddenly; ‘it would make a theme for a play—at least, not that identical story, but I’ve got an idea from it. I’ll go home and work it out.’

‘Not now!—you’ve only just come,’ said Celia, laughing. ‘I don’t believe you ever allow yourself any recreation; you are always working, and always so dreadfully in earnest.’

‘Am I? I’m afraid you think me very dull and uninteresting,’ he said humbly.

‘Oh, no; I didn’t mean that. But sit in a comfortable chair and tell me your new idea, instead of going home and imparting it all to Miss Grey.’

She said this half-slyly, half-petulantly, and he laughed happily.

‘I wasn’t going to run away at once,’ he

said, sitting down on the chair nearest to her. 'I want to talk to you about many things.'

'Well, begin by telling me this new idea of yours suggested by Swinburne, and then I'll tell you one that I have got too.'

'Oh, about the same poem, is it?'

'Partly. I'll see when you've told me yours. Now begin.'

'Why, it struck me that the theme is rather a fine one, and might be treated in a less repulsive manner without losing its force or pathos. I can conceive the situation of a high-born, proud woman taken captive, perhaps, in a siege, and rescued at the peril of his life by her faithful, devoted servant, who asks no reward but the joy of serving and guarding her——'

'Yes, and at the end he is rewarded by her gratitude as well; you'll add that?'

'Her gratitude—yes, that is all he dares

hope for—you think so? She couldn't give him more, being only her servant, of course.'

'She might—only it wouldn't be artistic: it would be romantic, though; and if one put the incident at a remote period, and dressed them up in picturesque, antique clothes, it wouldn't seem so incongruous. I like your idea—I like it very much; and it fits in with mine very well, too.'

'Does it? What is yours?'

'Well, Lady Banker has been bothering me to help her at her stupid bazaar. Do you know Lady Banker? No? Well, she is a bore—a dreadful bore; but she's a society leader, if you know what that is, and so it's as well to be civil to her, otherwise she says nasty things about you, and tells people you "make up," or are fast, or something which she likes to have the sole right of being. So I am thinking that if you write out that

idea of yours, and make it a romantic and really interesting little play for two characters, we might act it at Lady Banker's *café chantant*, you and I. See ?'

If she had said, 'You and I will stand on our heads at Lady Banker's,' he would have joyfully accepted ; and this was a perfectly delightful idea. He would have no difficulty whatever in writing an impassioned part for himself, and he thought he could write hers with equal vividness.

'You really mean it ?' he said eagerly, and she felt ashamed for a moment of having suggested anything that would give him such intense pleasure, when she knew that it could only lead to giving him pain afterwards. There was just something about this man different from the others. He had an uncomfortable knack of making her wish sometimes she were worthy of his admiration. No one else had ever made her feel

small and frivolous. He was always in such deadly earnest, it almost frightened her.

However, she had a special reason for wanting him to act with her at this bazaar. In the first place, she wanted Lady Banker to feel under an obligation to her; secondly, she was tired of making Society speculate as to whether she was going to marry Alec Watson, and this would give the gossips something new to wonder about; and lastly, she wanted to annoy Alec himself, as she knew she would do if she acted with Mark Sergison at a fashionable public bazaar.

It was curious that only that very afternoon she should have been reading that little poem, 'Stage Love.' She was just ready to 'play at half a love with half a lover.' It would be rather exciting; the theme lent itself to much that could be interpreted personally, or, if necessary, made purely an abstract question. Yes! it would

be very amusing—quite the most entertaining thing she had yet done.

While she was rapidly reviewing the situation Mark had been watching her very closely, and he waited anxiously for her reply to his question, 'You really mean it?' He fancied her hesitation sprang from a reluctance to appear with him in public. He felt himself so greatly her social inferior, and he knew the prejudices of her world against such as he. Lately he had considerably shifted his standpoint.

'I do, indeed!' she answered gaily. 'I think it will be immense fun.'

It would be exquisite enjoyment to him—he could not have called it 'fun;' but he was glad she consented, and he set his mind to work upon the details.

'I think,' said he after a slight pause, 'it would make it more telling if the lady was blind. It would make her so

much more helpless and dependent on him.'

Celia hesitated—it would mean keeping her eyes shut all the time, and that would be very dull.

'Oh, no!' she said quickly; 'don't make the poor thing too defenceless. If she hasn't got her eyes she would be completely at his mercy.'

'But that would draw out the finer part of his nature, and show his innate chivalry,' said Mark.

'I suppose men were chivalrous in those days,' she answered with a little sigh; 'it is so completely gone out of fashion now that one scarcely dreams of its possibility, does one?'

'I always think it is there just the same,' he said quietly; 'only, women don't believe in it, and never call it out. If tournaments were the fashion nowadays, I believe there

would be just as many knights to enter the lists as in days of old.'

Celia laughed rather contemptuously.

'Oh, Mr. Sergison, you haven't lived in my world! Men are much too cautious, too calculating, too self-centred altogether, to have the knightly spirit any more. The commercial spirit is what has destroyed the chivalrous in them. In old days men used to "do and dare" for women's sakes; now they sit still and just take all they can get, and then throw it away and say they didn't want it. Money and position are all that people live for now—love is thrown in as a sort of bagatelle *pour passer le temps*. What is that French saying? "*L'amour fait passer le temps et le temps fait passer l'amour.*" Nobody seriously loves nowadays; so nobody would ever think of risking anything for what they don't believe exists. However,' she added in a different tone, 'there's

no reason why in an early English romance you shouldn't put some chivalry : it would be rather refreshing as a contrast to modern manners.'

Mark looked very grave, and his voice was unsteady as he answered her :

' I wish I could make you think of men differently. I wish you hadn't the idea that everybody lives only for money and position. Don't you believe in art ? in the life of art for its own sake ? '

' On paper I do. I've never seen it in real life.'

' Because you have lived all your life in drawing-rooms and crowds, and haven't come in contact with men and women who are in earnest—who are devoured with zeal and enthusiasm for a great cause. Women whom I know——'

' Miss Grey, for instance ? '

He flushed slightly, but answered em-

phatically, 'Yes, Linda is one of them. You didn't see her as she really is the other day ; she didn't do herself justice. I know she is awkward and brusque.'

'She was downright rude !' interrupted Celia.

'Yes, yes, I know, she must have seemed so ; but you don't know how good and true she is, how single-hearted, how unflinching to the cause of justice and liberty.'

Celia could not stand panegyrics about other women, and least of all about such a cub as 'that Miss Grey ;' so she remarked drily—

'We were talking of men, weren't we ? I didn't mean to challenge Miss Grey's virtues.'

He looked confused for a moment ; he had not meant to give offence. She noticed his concern, and said in a more gracious tone—

‘Don’t let us argue about men or women. We have had such different experiences of both, and we should never be able to see life from one another’s point of view. You could never make me believe in a man’s disinterestedness, and I probably should fail equally in making you believe in his sordidness and selfishness. We are bound to judge humanity from the standpoint of our individual experience.’

‘Could you not have new experience which would change your standpoint?’ he asked hopefully.

‘I might. I don’t much believe in new experiences, though. I should find it was only the old thing with a new jacket on—a jacket, moreover, that didn’t fit.’

Mark shook his head.

‘You told me the first time I dined here that you never went amongst fashionable crowds—that you had a society of your own

which was unconventional. Where is it? You seem to me to be always in the thickest of the Society throng. Isn't it so?'

Celia coloured slightly.

'I have been out more this season than I used to be,' she answered frankly, 'and I don't wonder at your thinking I live for that sort of thing. But I detest it as much as ever; and if only I could persuade my father that we should be happier knowing only one quarter of the people we do know, I would be thankful. You don't know how bored I am with life: I wouldn't confess it to any one but you. And yet there isn't any other kind of life feasible in London.'

'Oh, Miss Adair!' he said eagerly, 'but there is. You only know one small section of London—there is another side to its life, a side which is ever so much more satisfying and better worth living.'

‘You mean the Bohemian side? but then Bohemia is so vulgar—it jars on me.’

‘Oh, I don’t mean Bohemia as you know it; at least not the frivolous, superficial side of it. I mean the land of workers, toilers, bread-winners, the Democracy: they are the only people who really live, who are never bored, who enjoy keenly and suffer keenly.’

‘Don’t!’ she said quickly; ‘don’t talk to me about that kind of thing—it frightens me; it reminds me of the days of the French Revolution, and of that line I was reading just now in Swinburne:

“The poor and the halt and the blind are keen and
mighty and fleet,
Like the noise of the blowing of wind is the sound of
the noise of their feet.”

She gave a little shiver. ‘I hate anything so bald and crude. I—I don’t like anything *bourgeois*.’

They were both silent for a few moments ; then she said, with one of her swift, radiant smiles, 'There, now, I have disgusted you. I am so sorry ; you mustn't think me shallow because I can't be as intense as you are.'

'I don't think you shallow ! Indeed, indeed, you don't know what I think of you !' he answered very earnestly, and fixing his deep grey eyes on her with a yearning desire to tell her then and there how he worshipped her. But he had too much to lose by such rash presumption at this stage of their intercourse, and with an effort he restrained himself.

'Well, now, for the next few days you must think of me as the proud and haughty lady to whom you are going to be tremendously devoted,' she said in a lighter tone. 'How long shall you be writing it ? The bazaar is to-morrow week. I must have a few days to learn my part.'

‘ You shall have it to-morrow night,’ he said. ‘ I will do it to-night and finish it in the morning, and get it type-written for you at once.’

‘ That will be splendid. Now for the period. It must be one with becoming dresses ; I couldn’t make myself a guy even for Lady Banker.’

‘ Oh ! but you must wear the same clothes all the time. You are a captive, remember ; you can only wear a sort of rough, loose drapery.’

‘ And my hair down ? and a general dishevelled appearance ? Ugh ! Well, all the more amusing. Very well, Mr. Ser-gison ; and you will get yourself up to look like a faithful serf. Only, don’t look too unkempt and dirty, or I shan’t be able to put any fervour into my gratitude at the end.’

‘ It is only to be gratitude, I suppose ?’

‘What else would you have?—between serf and mistress?’ she added hurriedly, for his eyes were uncomfortably eloquent just then.

‘As it is to be an early century romance—just by way of contrast to modern manners, I thought—perhaps—we might make the lady reward the servant with the gracious gift of her love. Would that be impossible?’

‘Oh, well, if it were only hinted at—suggested, as it were, that the lady might give it to him after a long time. If you didn’t make an incongruous love-scene between the two, I don’t mind; only, there is nothing more ridiculous than the sight of a woman letting herself down to the level of a man beneath her. And we don’t want to act a farce, remember.’

He could not tell if she were covertly trying to convey to him her meaning that

any attempt on his own part to approach her except as her social inferior would be looked upon by her as absurd and impossible ; or whether she was simply talking of the characters in their play.

At any rate, he would not offend her wishes.

‘That will be best,’ he said ; ‘we can leave it to the audience to speculate as to the actual state of the lady’s feelings. We will make her gently gracious, and the man shall feel exalted and elated with hope. Now, I had better go home and set to work, I think. I may bring it myself to-morrow. Shall you be in late?’

‘Come about six,’ she said, holding out her hand to bid him good-bye. ‘I’d ask you to dinner, only we have to go out immediately after ; besides, Mr. Watson may be here.’

‘Ah!’ ejaculated Mark with an involuntary compression of the lips at that name.

‘Why that expressive “ah!”?’ said she, smiling.

‘Nothing—I didn’t mean it.’

‘But you did ; you don’t like Mr. Watson.’

‘I have no right to any opinion ; I scarcely know him,’ he answered rather stiffly.

‘All the same, you have a very decided opinion—it isn’t a favourable one. Tell me, how does Mr. Watson strike you? You can be quite frank ; he and I are great friends, so you won’t alter my view of him by anything you say.’

‘Miss Adair, I beg your pardon for any seeming disparagement of your friends. I really have no right to judge them. If Mr. Watson is one of them, I am sure he must be a good fellow. I—I—the type is not one I am familiar with, that is all.’

‘And yet it is the type of man one meets most of in London!’

‘Yes; the type which makes you so cynical about all other men.’

‘You haven’t told me where to find those others yet!’

‘I mustn’t stop now, but some day I will tell you more about the same subject.’

‘But not if you mean to convert me to Democracy! I’m a Plutocrat to the tips of my fingers, Mr. Sergison—please remember that; please, please do—always!’

She laughed as she shook hands, but there was a note of warning in her voice which did not escape his quick ear; and as he went away down-stairs and out of her house he felt as if he were walking on the edge of a precipice, where he would need all his nerve and caution to save himself from immediate destruction. How he longed to explain to her the true meaning of Equality, from the Democratic point of view! How tempted he felt to put into the mouth of

the serf he was to personate some of his ideas on the subject of so-called 'class' differences! How happy he would be if he could convert her by his eloquence, and make her acknowledge that the old terms, 'aristocrat,' 'democrat,' she must be prepared to reverse in their application to classes or individuals! For he should convince her that though the adage might be true of not making a silken purse out of a sow's ear, equally true was it that there were other things in the world besides silken purses, and that even sows' ears were indispensable in their way.

But although a Democrat he was also a man—in love. And at present he knew he must be cautious, patient, and wise; therefore he restrained his pen and hoped for the rest.

CHAPTER VIII

‘One way of getting an idea of our fellow-countrymen’s miseries is to go and look at their pleasures.’—GEORGE ELIOT.

The Heir-Apparent was still drawing nightly full houses, and Mark Sergison was as much as ever the object of surmise and of pursuit on the part of London hostesses in search of a new lion.

As soon as it became known that he had written a two-part play for himself to act with Celia Adair, the success of Lady Banker’s *café chantant*, at which it was to be given, was a foregone conclusion.

Nobody ever knew how Celia had managed to attach this new dramatist to herself; but since she had been clever enough to enlist his literary talent in a

popular cause (such as the object for which the bazaar was to be held, namely, the 'Society for carrying the Gospel to the North Pole'), the tickets for the performance were in great demand.

She herself was quite satisfied with the play, and accepted her part cheerfully.

She and Mark had discussed it vehemently before its completion, and she had forced him to alter it considerably in accordance with her imperative wish that there should be no love-scenes, and the final curtain one which was suggestive rather than conclusive.

The audience was to be left in doubt as to whether the faithful Alcuin was to receive any more tangible form of reward than the gratitude and gracious favour of the haughty Hildegarde.

And, as Celia desired, the solution of this question supplied the spectators at

each performance with ample food for discussion.

‘I don’t think it is at all a *nice* play,’ remarked one of Lady Banker’s daughters, who at no time professed any great admiration for Celia.

‘No,’ chimed in her sister; ‘it is just like Miss Adair to put herself into an impossible situation.’

‘So unnecessary to act a mediæval character when she looks so essentially modern,’ added another girl who had been robbed of many a partner by Celia’s manœuvres to attach all the dancing men.

‘I am sure the creature is in love with her,’ said Miss Banker number one.

‘I am sure I don’t care if he is!’ retorted number two, snappishly.

At that moment Isabel Harper appeared amongst the little knot of jealous girls, and

she was attacked as being one of Celia's professed intimates.

‘What is the ending of that ridiculous play? You know Miss Adair, so can probably enlighten us. Is this the precursor of her engagement to Mr. Sergison? or is it only done to annoy Mr. Watson?’

This was precisely the question Isabel had asked herself, and she would have given much to know the answer.

‘Here comes Celia herself!’ she exclaimed, as the two actors in the scene under discussion entered the hall, still in their costumes—Mark looking almost handsome in his serf's dress, and Celia in the most becoming of gowns, made of white serge and loose and flowing in drapery, and without jewellery or ornament of any kind.

She looked quickly round as if searching for some one. Isabel went up to her and said suavely—

‘We were all praising your acting, dear. But we want to know so much how the story ended. Does she really marry him?’

Celia shrugged her shoulders and turned to Mark.

‘How should I know!’ she said indifferently. ‘I did not write the play. Ask the author.’

‘History leaves us in doubt,’ he said gravely, and Isabel frowned.

‘What a bear he is!’ she thought; ‘but what a good actor too! for on the stage he looked gentle enough.’

Then, turning again to Celia, she remarked—

‘What has become of Mr. Watson? He is surely coming to see you act?’

‘He will not be here to-day; he will come to-morrow,’ answered Celia shortly; and then, as Mr. Adair appeared at the farther end of the room, she exclaimed—

‘There is my father. I wish I could make him see me. I want to ask him if he intends going to the White House reception to-night.’

‘Oh!’ said Isabel, ‘are you going there? How lucky you are!’

‘Do you call it luck to have to tire—bore oneself to death for five hours on end, Isabel? I make you a present of my luck to-night. That is to say, if we have to go to all the stupid places at which we are due.’

‘But you never seem to go anywhere unless it pleases you, Celia. I don’t know how you manage it, but you get out of your engagements in the airiest fashion without offending people; whereas, if we were to do that, nobody would ever ask us to their houses again.’

‘Oh, my dear Isabel! it is quite simple, I assure you. Society is very like a big,

stupid bull-dog. It looks very formidable, and pretends to be very fierce; but, show it you are not afraid of it, and it is as meek as a lamb, and will follow you anywhere. It is you timid, conventional people who get bitten by the bull-dogs.'

Mr. Adair joined his daughter at this point, and she noticed at once that he was not himself. He looked worn and considerably older than usual, and his whole air was *distract*, and unlike his ordinary jocose *bonhomie*.

'Are we dining out anywhere to-night?' was his abrupt question of Celia, who replied promptly—

'We had accepted Lady Buckwheat, papa; but, of course, we needn't go,'—adding, 'Are you not feeling well to-day?'

'I am worried, my dear; and I couldn't stand any cooking but that of Charlemagne to-night,' responded Mr. Adair, turning

away as if he dreaded further interrogation.

In their home life father and daughter stood on a footing of mutual understanding. In their manner to one another they were reserved and undemonstrative, but Celia was shrewdly observant, and no detail of their life escaped her. She rapidly surveyed in her mind the probable causes of Mr. Adair's present worry, and came to the conclusion that it was not unconnected with a well-known beauty in Vienna who had long been a disturbing influence in the Adair household.

She had, therefore, the tact to forbear from asking any questions, and exerted her fertile brain to devise an excuse that should sound adequate for breaking the impending dinner engagement.

The bazaar in itself differed in no way from others of its season. Outside the

hall were flags and a double row of carriages, and the usual long line of men-servants exchanging items of gossip. Inside there was the customary pushing and edging to reach the stalls, where every one was trying to sell what nobody wanted to buy. There were the inevitable pretty, chattering stall-holders in fantastic costumes besieging problematic purchasers with impossible wares ; the raffles, fish-ponds, and fortune-tellers ; the ubiquitous military band, the close-heated atmosphere, affected merriment, and the general sense of unreality. And the gigantic Sham that was being perpetrated in the name of Philanthropy, the only Reality behind it all.

Alec Watson sauntered in amongst the gay crowd on the second day of the bazaar, prepared to be as much bored as he subsequently declared himself, but obliged, in order to fulfil a rashly made

promise, to attend in the capacity of accompanist to the Swedish singer. Isabel Harper chanced to meet him as they were both leaving the theatrical hall, and she asked him breathlessly his opinion of the performance.

‘Beastly dull!’ he replied gruffly. ‘Can’t think what you found to rave over last night. Bad form, too, and the part is absurd for Miss Adair. I’ve seen her act much better than that.’

‘Oh! I think she’s sweet!’ protested Isabel effusively.

‘Humph!’ he grunted; ‘it’s more than I feel in this pestilentially hot oven. Why are artists always late, I wonder! Elsa Kronstadt hasn’t come yet, and she is to sing in five minutes.’

‘It is so good of you to play her accompaniments everywhere!’ said Isabel, with malicious sweetness.

‘First time I ever did it,’ he answered curtly ; ‘never did it anywhere else.’

‘Oh, dear! Mr. Watson, how cross you are to-day!’ began Isabel in her high-pitched voice, that was irritating in its perfection of artificiality, when he cut her short with—

‘Beg pardon, Miss Isabel, but there is Elsa Kronstadt; I must make my way through the crowd somehow. Good gracious! what has she done to herself! I wish some one would teach her not to lay it on so thick in the daytime.’

He hurried away and was lost in the throng, leaving Miss Harper to speculate on the reasons for his shortness of temper.

Between the performances of the *Service of Hope* was a long interval, in which Mark persuaded Celia to come out of the heated rooms to a cool spot on the staircase where an open window was sending a refreshing

draught of air through the building, and where later on Alec found her.

Mark did not wish to appear over-attentive, and yielded his place beside Celia as soon as the other man approached.

He was half-inclined to change his clothes and take a walk in the fresh air. While thus standing irresolute, he became suddenly aware of an altercation taking place in the vestibule below between the doorkeeper and some other person, and the name of 'Adair' repeated with frequent emphasis attracted his attention. As he listened, he heard the other man say that somebody was dead, and that Miss Adair must be found.

'Somebody was dead!'

Could it be Celia's father? Mark hastened down to the scene of the altercation, and found the Adairs' footman imparting the ghastly news that indeed

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Mr. Adair had been found dead in the Park, and that he had been sent to fetch his young mistress without delay. Mark turned away, too much stunned to be able all at once to collect his wits and think how best to tell the dreadful fact to Celia. How in the midst of that serio-comedy to break the news of such a tragedy!

END OF VOL. I.

